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# Ninth Avenue

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## NINTH AVENUE







# ·NINTH· AVENUE

*By*  
**MAXWELL  
BODENHEIM**  
    



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## **PART ONE**







# NINTH AVENUE

## CHAPTER I

WHEN the light of morning touches the buildings and pavements of a city, it always seems to borrow their hardness and to lose in some degree its quality of flowing detachment. The Sunday morning that fell upon Ninth Avenue, New York City, gave you a sense of invisible stiffness in its very air. The buildings, with their smudged, flat fronts and tops, presented the impression of huge warehouses stretching down both sides of the street—the appearance of holding commodities rather than human beings. Most of them were five or six stories in height, and their curtained, oblong windows and the bright, tawdry shops at their base had an oddly lifeless aspect, in spite of the sounds and animations which occurred within and around them. The iron elevated-railroad structure that extended down the street, with all of its roar and rush of trains, could not destroy the spirit of silent inertia that lurked within the scene.

Blanche Palmer stood in front of a bureau, in one of the apartments that lined the street, and combed her dark red, bobbed hair, as though it were a sacred and perilous performance. She was only partially dressed, and the mild light that came in through a



rear window from the courtyard brought an extra vividness to her semiplump arms, abruptly rounded shoulders and moderately swelling bosom. Their freshness stood out, a little forlorn and challenging, in the disordered room with its half drab and half gaudy arrangements. The brass bed, the magazine-posters of pretty women against the pink-flowered wallpaper, the red plush chair with the most infinitely smug of shapes, the white chintz, half dirty curtain and dark green shade at the window—all of them seemed to be meanly contending against the youth and life of her body.

She was fairly tall, with most of the weight of her body centered below her waist and with an incongruously small torso, but this effect was not as clumsy as it might have been, since it was relieved by a bold approach to symmetry. Something of a child and an amazon met in her body. Her face was not pretty if you examined each of its features separately—the overwide lips, the nose tilting out too suddenly at the tip, and the overstraight, shaved eyebrows—but the whole of it had a piquant and enticing irregularity, and it was redeemed by her large, deeply set, bluish gray eyes and the fine smoothness of her cream-white skin.

Her twenty years of life had given her a self-consciousness, and a hasty worldly wisdom, and a slightly complacent sexual alertness, and these three qualities blended into the customary expressions on her face. Yet at odd moments it showed questioning and dissatisfied shades. She was just a little more frank and wondering than the other girls in her environment—



just a little distressed and seeking beneath all of the affected wriggings, and ignorances, and small, cruel impulses that ruled her heart and mind. As she stood before the bureau, the treble of a child's voice emerged from the babble of sounds in the surrounding apartments, lifting the words: "Well, it ain't gonna rain no mo-ore, it ain't gonna rain no mo-ore; how in the heck can I wash my neck when it ain't gonna rain no mo-ore." Blanche took up the song, half humming it as she slipped on an old, black, sleeveless evening gown which she still kept to wear about the apartment when visitors were not present or expected. It had a big, scarlet satine flower sewed at the side of the waist and was extremely low-necked and gave her a near-courtesan touch, increased by the over-thick rouge and lipstick on her face. She could not dispense with cosmetics, even before her family, because they were too inherently a part of the shaky sexual pride within her, which always needed to be glossed and protected because it had been frequently hurt and discountenanced in competitions and comparisons with the other girls in her life.

She stepped down the dark hallway and entered the living-room, where her family sat and pored over the Sunday papers. The hour was verging on noon, and the debris and confusion of a past breakfast stood on the square, uncovered table in the middle of the room. Blanche eyed it peevishly.

"Oh, for Gawd's sake, what a dump," she said. "How'm I going to sit down with gue and coffee all over the chairs?"



"Too bad about you," her brother, Harry, answered, with an amiable jeer in his voice. "Too bad. We'll move up on the Drive an' get a lotta servunts for you, huh?"

"Sure, go ahead, but as long's we're not there yet you c'n move your big legs and help clean off the table," she replied.

"Whatsamatter, you parulyzed?" he asked, still genial as he rose and picked up some of the dishes.

Her sister Mabel and her oldest brother, Philip, joined in the slangy, waggish repartee as Blanche went to the kitchen and came back with a cup of coffee and a fried egg. The father chortled behind the comic-section of one of the papers, oblivious to this usual Sunday morning "kidding-match," and the mother was busy in the kitchen. Harry Palmer, known to the bantam-class of the prize-fighting ring as Battling Murphy, was a youth of twenty-two, with a short body whose shoulders and chest were full, hard lumps, and whose legs were thinly crooked but steel-like. His small, black eyes had a dully fixed, suspicious, partly dumb and partly cunning look that never left them, even in the midst of his greatest smiles and laughs, and his nose was shaped like the beginning of a corkscrew, and his thick lips just touched each other, with the lower one slightly protruding. His moist black hair was brushed backward; his skin was a dark brown with a dab of red running through it. The start of a primitive man, forced to become tricky and indirect as it escaped from the traps and ways of city streets, but still longing for direct blows and



curses, showed on every inch of him. He was cruel without wit enough to know that he was cruel, and in his most lenient and joking moments the little imagination and sentiment that he had grew large in its own estimation and made him feel that he was as decent and kind as he could be in a life where you had to "put it over" the other fellow, or go under.

He prided himself especially on his generous and affectionate attitude toward his family. They were the only people who had any actual claims on him—his own flesh and blood, yep—but he felt that it was necessary to hurt them whenever they objected to his actions, or tried to hold him down, or did anything that they should not have done. His idea of superiority was not to allow any one to boss him unless it contributed to his material gain, and to order people around whenever he could. Part of his family-pride was a real emotion and part of it was a dogged peace-offering to his more openly selfish and cruel words and actions to other people. He looked upon women as creatures made for his particular enjoyment, but they alone were able to revive the streak of surlily shame-faced tenderness within him, and if they were exceptionally good-looking, and besieged by troubles, he wanted to pet them and give them money. He intended to avoid marriage until he met a pretty girl of his own age, who would refuse to give herself to him, and who could hold her own in the rough parryings of conversation, and show a practical disposition and a sense of the value of money.

He had fought in preliminary six-round bouts—



with erratic success—since he was twenty, and he was known to the ring as a courageous but unscientific fighter, whose main fault was that he would not train rigorously for his encounters. On the side he was associated with a gang of bootleggers, in the position of a guard who often went with them to protect their deliveries, receiving a small share of the profits. The Palmer family was mainly dependent on his support, since his other brothers and sisters did little more than pay their own expenses, and his earnings for the past two years had really lifted them to a point where they could have deserted their upper-proletarian life. His parents preferred the Ninth Avenue apartment and its surroundings, because it had been stamped into their spirits for years, and because they liked the boisterous freedoms, the lack of etiquette, and the semiunderworld plainness of their environment. He and his brothers and sisters would not have been averse to moving to “a sweller joint,” but the desire was not yet sufficiently deep to stir them to any action.

His older brother, Philip, who was twenty-five, was looked upon as the most “high-toned” member of the family. Philip worked in a neighboring drug store and studied at night to become a pharmacist, and had had two years of a high-school education. He was a tall man of much less sturdy physique than his brother, and he dressed in the manner of a lower dandy, with much fussing over cravats, shirts and suits of clothes. He had a weak face beneath his curly brown hair—the face of a sneaking philanderer, invaded a bit by kindly impulses which he tried to suppress but which



often led to his undoing. His brown, bulging eyes, soft mouth that tried to be hard, and tilting out nose inherited from his mother—these features disputed the sneering nonchalance with which he strove to become one with the life around him. He was not naturally studious, but his brain was cautious enough to realize that he was not adapted for the more arduously physical tasks in life, and that he would have to learn—at any cost—some sheltering and fairly profitable profession. For this reason he applied himself to absorbing the details of pharmacy, with much laboring and many secret groans.

His sister Mabel was the adored young coquette of the family. They regarded Blanche as a silly, fluctuating, and slightly queer person in comparison to her sister, for Blanche made no serious effort “to play” men for their money and favors, and often went out with the poorer and more ordinary youths of the neighborhood, and revealed, in the opinion of her family, a spirit that was too jauntily reckless—too “easy.” Mabel, on the other hand, was reckless enough, with her cabaret, private club and automobile parties, but the recklessness was more a patent exuberance used to cover up an excellent canniness. Her people had the feeling that she could not be taken advantage of, and that she would play the game carefully until she landed a wealthy man willing to marry her. Physically, she was a girl of eighteen years, with her body in that fetching state of transition between budding and maturity; mentally, she was twelve years old; and emotionally, she was a woman of fifty.



Girls of her kind, whose environment has been split between their homes in an almost slummy district and the falsetto battle of Broadway, become sensually wise overnight. At eighteen, Mabel was literally stuffed with tricks, and informations, and cool wiles picked up on streets and in cabarets, and her mind merely functioned as an assistant in this process. At the very bottom she was sentimental and fearful, but only an actually dire predicament could have extracted these qualities—an unexpected danger or calamity. She was close to medium height, with a slenderness made charming by an unusually full bosom, and a pale brown skin that had a sheen upon it like that on the surface of a pond, and black, bobbed hair that was curled for three or four days after each visit to the beauty parlor. Her little nose was almost straight, with hardly a trace of the Palmer curve, and her lips were loosely parted and petite, and her big, black eyes assumed the most vacantly innocent of stares, unless she was angry, when the lids half closed between dancing sparks.

Her father, William Palmer, had worked as a bartender, during the days when his country had not yet established a new and widespread class of criminals, and he had once owned a small saloon, afterwards lost through his dice and poker-playing lusts. After the advent of prohibition, he had branched out as a bootlegger, in a very modest way, but he lacked the vigor and acumen necessary to such an occupation—he was now a man of fifty-five—and the arrest of some of his cronies had frightened him into giving up



his illegal trade. Then he became the ostensible manager of his prize-fighting son, and now he did little more than hang around the gymnasiums where his son trained, dicker for a few minutes with the owners of boxing clubs, loaf around his home, and sit in all-night drinking and poker parties. He still had the remains of a once powerful body, in spite of his lowered shoulders and grayish-black hair slowly turning to baldness, and he was one of those men who hold out against dissipation with an inhuman tenacity, until near seventy, when their hearts or stomachs abruptly collapse, and they die. He was of average height and always tried to carry himself with a great, chipper bluff at youthful spryness. Upon his brown face the twisted nose which he had given to his son, Harry, stood above broad and heavy lips, and there was a piggish fixity to his often bloodshot eyes that were too little for the ample size of his head.

He was a man who lived in two worlds at the same time—that of verbal bluffing, uttered to soothe and shun the sore spots and cruel resolves in his nature, and that one in which he endlessly schemed for money and ease, and was willing to commit any legal or well-hidden crime to procure them. He would have grown wrathful if you had accused him of being dishonest, and his rage would have been quite sincere. He had practiced self-deception for such a long time that each part of him was genuinely blind to the tactics and purposes of the other part. His children were, to him, the great, living boast with which he could dismiss the world's and his own allegations of failure. "I never



got what I wanted but I'll be damned if they don't," he sometimes muttered to himself, and the excuse that he gave himself was that their better advantages, and his own guidance, would enable them to win out in the virtues which he had transplanted within them. He had lost his own parents at an early age and had been raised in a public institution, and had been forced to work hard when he was not yet fifteen, and he doted on citing these beginnings as an explanation for all of his material failures. He had punished and commanded his children when they were still in knee trousers and short skirts—often shouting at them and beating them about the legs—and he had struggled outrageously against their gradual assumption of authority and independence, but his delight in remaining their master had finally subsided to an even stronger pleasure—that of a man who was watching the masterful qualities which his children had derived from him.

"They get it honest, all right," he had once said to himself, after a squabble in which his son Harry, then seventeen, had threatened to knock him out. "I never took any sass from anybody myself, you bet I didn't. They'll never learn to fight for themselves 'f I take all the spunk and pep outa them."

Now he clung to the gruff pose of ordering them about, but never really cared when they disregarded most of his words, or talked back to him, as long as the boys kept out of arrest and the girls did not seem to be openly or particularly unvirtuous. He suspected that his daughters had probably "gone the limit" with



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one or two men whom they knew, but the absence of feminine virtue to him was not a matter for agitation unless it was persistent, complete and loudly flaunted. He wanted his daughters to be "wise" and to end up in decent marriages, but he was not averse to their "cutting up" a bit, as long as they kept it well hidden. His favorite children were Harry and Mabel and he never overlooked any chance to flatter and serve them in some manner.

His wife, Kate, was the least aggressive member of the family, and her children, Philip and Blanche, held in a much-qualified way many of her characteristics. Two years younger than her husband, she was a lean and not oversturdy woman whose head rose only an inch above his shoulders. She had been a servant girl just migrated from Ireland when he—a bartender in the block in which she lived—had married her because of his inability to seduce her in spite of her meek worship of him, and because her turn of figure and her tart, fresh face had appealed to him. She had toiled most of her life, with only a short period of intermission before the birth of her first child, and she had frequently taken his drunken blows and his palpable faithlessness after the first two years of their marriage, and they had often lived in the dirtiest and most hellish of poverties when his gambling losses had reduced them to pennilessness, but something like a mangled dream had never left her spirit—not plaintive, and not precisely wistful, but more the quietness of a peasant girl never quite living in her surroundings and always longing for the strong peace of village and



hill. The dream was stupid, maligned, numb—but still it persisted. She had little courage, and yet a stubborn flare of it often shot out when she was driven into a corner, and her main reliances were obstinacy and endurance. Unlike her husband, she did not share the bragging illusions which he had concerning their children, and she felt that her sons and daughters were imperfect, overwild and far too selfish, and she cared for them more because life had deprived her of all other opportunities for compensation. She favored Blanche most because Blanche seemed to her to be more of a reproduction of what she, the mother, had been in her own girlhood. It was not that she had any keen insight into her daughter's character and needs—it was only the very cloudy but warm feeling that Blanche was more honest and "fine" than the rest of her children. Mrs. Palmer had long since ceased to love her husband, or to respect anything about him except his physical strength and his masculine braveries, but she had fallen into a rut of obedience to him, from which she lacked even the desire to extricate herself, and she preserved an attitude of bare affection, to impress her children and to keep him in good humor whenever she could. She had rigid notions concerning honesty and morality not held by the rest of her family, and she often weakly complained against their "looseness" and accepted it only because she could not change it. Below her still abundant, grayish-red hair, her face was like the seamed and puffed and violated copy of Blanche's countenance, with much the same eyes, lips and nose,



but without the hopeful smiles and uncertain questions on the other's face.

As the family gathered in the living-room on this Sunday noon, chaffing and listening to the latest fox-trot and waltz records from the slightly nasal phonograph that stood on a shaky table in a corner of the room, and reading the papers with the jealous, spell-bound attention with which obscure people greet the notorieties and "stunts" of other men and women, the mother still worked in the kitchen, cleaning the breakfast dishes and preparing the five o'clock Sunday dinner. Kate Palmer usually refused to allow her girls to help her with the housework, for more or less selfish reasons, because of her pitiful pride in the fact that she could manage things herself—the elderly housewife, to whom work had become an only distraction and importance—and because she really dreaded the possibility of their attractive, feminine hands becoming "chapped and ugly-like." On Sundays the Palmers, in varying degrees, were always in their best mood. They had all slept later than on other days, and the Sabbath-day was associated in their spirits with "sorta making up for what you pulled off during the week"—the faint, uncomprehended return of conscience and forgotten religious precepts—and with more peaceful forms of enjoyment. Early every Sunday morning the mother went to a Presbyterian church on the outskirts of their neighborhood, and sometimes her husband or one of her daughters would accompany her, both of them stiffly empty and ill-at-ease. If you had asked all of the



Palmers whether they believed in God and in Christianity, they would instantly have replied in the affirmative, after giving you a wondering, suspicious look, and yet their belief was merely the snubbed but never-quite-relinquished shield which their fears became conscious of at rare and odd moments. In case you died, you wanted to know that you were on the right side of things and in line for some possible reward—this was the only shape that religion had to them. Its exhortations and restrictions were jokes that could not possibly survive in the sordidness, and strain, and sensual longing of your life—you knew that at the bottom but you never admitted it to yourself on the top. Again, there was a consolation, dim and yet imperative, in feeling that a vast, hazy, grand Father was controlling their days, and in moments of sore need, or danger, or pain, they would have instinctively and even beseechingly called out His name.

When the papers were exhausted, the conversation of the Palmers became more steady and personal.

“Guess you’re goin’ out to-night with that Jew-kike uh yours,” said Harry, trying to get a rise out of Blanche. “Can’t you pick out somethin’ better than a Christ-killer, huh?”

“What’s it to you?” she asked, coolly. “Show you a good-looking Jewish girl and you’ll fall all over yourself trying to date her up. I know you.”

“Sure, but I’d just play her for what I could get,” answered Harry. “I’ve got a notion you’re kinda sweet on that Loo-ee Rosenberg, ’r whatever his name is.”



"Well, she'd better not be," said the father, with a scowl. "I don't mind when some kike takes her out for a good time—their jack's as good as any other guys—but I'm not lettin' any Jews get into this family."

Blanche gave them a scornful smile. She was far from being in love with Rosenberg, and the matter was neither pressing nor irritating, but she felt a general defiance against their masculine habit of laying down the law to women.

"I guess I'm old enough to tend my own business, pa," she said.

"Oh, you are, huh," answered her father. "Well, maybe we'll see about that."

"Aw, I know what's eating both of you," said Mabel, in her expressionless, thinly liquid voice. "You're sore 'cause Harry lost to a Jew in that fight he had up in Harlem. Kid Goldman, that's the one. When you going to beat him up, Harry?"

"I'll get him, I'll get him, don't worry," her brother answered, frowning as he remembered the affront to his vanity. "I was outa condition that night, and my left wasn't workin' good, that's all. Wait'll I get him in the ring again."

"You know what I've always told you—you got the makin's of a champion 'f you'll only get down to business," said his father. "You're trailin' around too much with that bootleggin' gang uh yours. No fighter ever got to the top with a bottle in his hand, I'm tellin' you."

"G'wan, you know damn well I'm down to the gym



five days a week," answered Harry, who realized the truth of his father's words, but wanted to minimize it with his own reply. "An' what's more, I don't see any of you turnin' down that fifty they slip me ev'ry Monday. Money don't lay around on the street—you got to get it any place you can."

"Well, I ain't any too anxious 'bout hearin' the cops knockin' on this door some day," his father responded, peevishly.

"Go ahead, drink your fool self to death—who cares," said Mabel, who had become petulant at the thought of the grand style in which they could all live if her brother would only rise to the head of his class. "You've got plenty of muscle but no sense, that's the trouble with you."

"Say, how many times 've you seen me drunk, how many?" Harry asked, beginning to be angry at this exposure of his weakest trait. "Ev'ry one in this joint's always lappin' up all I bring home, an' I never touch it myself. 'F I do go on a jag once'n a while it's my business. You can't get up in the fight game unless you're on the inside—there's too many big crooks higher up fixin' things."

"I don't believe it—you're just looking for a way out," said Blanche, to whom Harry was a generous but conceited brother—a strong, vicious baby who imagined himself to be a model of shrewdness. At the bottom she disliked his bulldozing, prying ways, but her dislike was not yet strong enough to overcome the more enforced feelings of gratitude and blood-ties within her heart. Harry always suspected



that Blanche was the one member of his family not impressed by his prowess and his knowledge of the world, and he never gave up his efforts to increase her respect, with all the argument and repartee at his command.

"I am, huh," he said, answering her last remark. "What do you know about it? I suppose you get all that info' uh yours punchin' the cash register down at the cafeteria. The only way you're wise is with your mouth. That middle-weight champ fight down at the Terrace was fixed up a week ago and I've got it straight. Just watch the papers tuhorrow night."

"Aw, I've heard a lotta roomors goin' around, but that's hot air," said his father. "Garvey'd be a damn fool to sell his title for any amount—I don't care 'fit's one hundred thousan'. He ain't had it a year yet, an' there's plenty uh holes left in the meal-ticket."

"Listen to somethin', will yuh," answered Harry, who really knew what he was talking about in this matter. "Garvey's gonna give up the title now and then win it back in a return bout. Lose it on a foul an' raise a big holler—that's the scheme. Young Anderson'll keep it f'r a year 'r so, an' make a pile of dough cleanin' up all the suckers in the sticks. With the movie stuff an' the easy pickin's he'll rake in three times 's much as his manager give Garvey's tuh fix it all up. I got it from a guy who was there when they all talked it over, only I can't say his name 'cause I'd get my bean drilled through 'f they ever found out I told."

"Are you kiddin' me?" demanded his father.



"I hope to croak if I am!"

"Oh, boy, watch me put thirty dollars on that fight," cried Philip, who had been sitting beside his father and listening avidly.

"Well, go slow, go slow," advised his father. "I know Harry wouldn't give us a bum stir, but them agreements 'r' often bungled up 'r double-crossed at the last minnit."

The men began a discussion of prize-fighting conditions in general, with much vehemence and a comical contrast of naive and foxy opinions, and the two girls brought out manicure-sets of flashy celluloid, and fiddled with their nails. Something that was not depression but unobtrusively akin to it, stirred inside of Blanche. She had felt it at times before and had never been able to fathom it beyond her sense that life was too underhanded, and that she didn't like this aspect of it. As she listened to the men, with their endless recitals of frauds and machinations, the little weight moved within her breast. Fake, fake, fake—that was all you ever heard. Wasn't there anything honest and good in the world? It sure didn't look like there was, most of the time. Oh, well, why bother so much about it? You could never get along in this world unless you "belonged"—unless you were like the things around you.

She started to think of Louis Rosenberg, the man with whom she had an engagement for the coming night. She didn't love him, sure not, but he wasn't a bad fellow at that. He seemed to be an honest boy, and sometimes he talked about big, fancy things, like



why people hated each other so much, and why the world wasn't better than it was, and he used a word now and then that he called art—something that made people write books and do paintings and statuary, and get wild over nothing that any one else could see. He certainly was different from most men all right. He kissed her sometimes, but he never tried to "get fresh" (getting fresh, to Blanche, was the placing of a man's hands upon any covered part of her body except the arms). Maybe that was why she didn't love him. He was too darn good, and a girl wanted a fellow to "try something" now and then, if he was slow about it and didn't act as though he expected her to fall for him (respond to him) immediately. Then, when he did try it, she could tell just how much she cared for him, and she repulsed him, or accepted him to some extent, according to how nervous and glad he made her feel. Well, anyway, there were always enough men who tried to make advances to her, and Rosenberg was something of a relief.

She met him that night on the corner of Broadway and Forty-second Street, where the theater lights clustered like bits of a soul burning in oil, and an endless, crawling stream of automobiles and taxicabs hid the pavement, and where the tall, rectangular buildings and the suavely gaudy shops seemed to be the only unexcited and unsensual objects of the scene. Rosenberg scarcely ever called for her at the apartment, and when he did he waited outside on the stoop, because Blanche felt that she would be "mortified



to death" if her father and her brothers should choose to act unfriendly toward him, and she didn't want to run the risk of such an occurrence. She was wearing a very thin, short-sleeved, georgette dress that extended only two inches below her knees and was of dull white with a dark red flower-pattern, and semi-transparent, flesh-colored stockings, and brown shoes with high heels, and a black felt hat shaped like an upside-down cup, with a red bow at the side. Like many girls in her environment, she dressed with a combination of unconscious artistry and cheap, over-flashy display.

Rosenberg was a youth of twenty-three, who worked at the receiving desk in one of the Public Library branches, and was beginning to think a bit too much for his happiness, prodded by the "higher literature" that he was reading for the first time. Previous to his Library job he had worked as a shoe salesman and had given it up because he had failed to see that he was "getting anywhere" and because he wanted to do something out of the ordinary but didn't know quite what it should be. He lived with a family of brothers and sisters, and they, together with his parents, regarded him as a pleasant "schlemiel," who was always talking about things but never accomplishing anything, though they were willing to let him alone as long as he worked and supported himself. He had met Blanche at the cafeteria where she worked as a cashier on weekdays, through the expedient of opening a gradual conversation with her as he paid his check each noon. Finally he had grown bold enough



to ask if he could "take her out" and she had assented because she had liked the diffident style in which his request was worded.

He was tall and narrow-shouldered, but he was wiry and his arms were not unmuscular. His light brown face, with its hooked nose, dark, large-lidded eyes, and thin mouth, often had the look of a puzzled dreamer, bowing to practical barriers but still trying, half-heartedly, to peer beyond them. In his attire he wavered between negligence and neatness, his tastes running to dark suits and loose collars and brightly striped shirts, and his leading vanity was his wavy black hair, which he often combed for ten minutes at a stretch.

Since the hour was only eight o'clock—still too early for them to visit the lower Broadway dance-hall which they frequented—Blanche and Rosenberg walked over to Bryant Park and sat on one of the wooden-iron benches along the cement walk and looking out on the orderly, clipped levels of grass. The late spring night, with its warm air that had the barest threat of coolness in it, and its cloudless sky dotted with stars and a moon at which you could glance now and then with the feeling that they were pretty and a bit mystifying, and the more immediate lights around you, with their warm, come-on-and-see-what's-under-me winks, and all the sounds of pleasure-seeking traffic—these things brought Blanche a light-hearted, knowing mood. She was a girl, young and rather handsome, and there was nothing that she



couldn't make men do if she had only cared enough about it.

"Tell you what we'll do, Lou, we'll take that ferry ride over to Staten Island," she said. "I love to get out on the water when it's night."

"Let's not and say we did," he answered, moodily.

"Gee, I never saw a fellow like you," she replied. "Dance, dance, that's all you care about. Here I know you're short on money, and here I'm giving you a chance to get away with forty cents for the night—four thin dimes—and you turn it down."

"Don't always rub in how poor I am," he said, nettled. "'F I was so darn crazy about money, like other guys are, I'd get it all right. There's other things I'm interested in—books, and good plays, and watching what other people do. They all call me lazy at home, but it don't bother me any. I don't see that they get so much out of life by working their heads off all the time."

Blanche felt a little scornful and a little inquiring as she listened to him. Who ever heard of saying that people shouldn't work—what would become of them if they didn't? Besides, what did he get out of all his reading and this "think-ing" of his? He was a boob in many respects, and in a way she was wasting her time with him. She could have been in the company of men who could show her an actual good time—high-class cabarets and automobile parties, and the best theaters and restaurants. Yet, after she went out with these men for a while she always grew tired of them. They all got down to what they wanted from



her, and it became a bald question of taking or rejecting them—you couldn't "string them along" forever—and they all lacked something that she was unable to put her finger on—something "classy" and aboveboard and decent without being goody-goodish. When she "let them go too far," under the hilarious urge of liquor, she never felt quite right about it afterwards. She could never rid herself of the feeling that the man had not deserved what he had received and that she had been just another girl on his list. Rosenberg was the one man who came nearest to fulfilling this mysterious lack, but he was deficient in all of the other requisites, and his physical appeal was weak to her.

"Well, you don't read a book when you dance, do you?" she asked at last, desiring to take a mild jab at him. "Gee, but you're the cat's something. I wish you had more get-up about you."

"Yeh, it's too bad I haven't got a roll," he answered. "Sometimes I b'lieve that's all you girls think about."

An anger mounted within her.

"Say, 'f I did, why'd I have to pick you out?" she asked. "You make me sick and tired!"

"Aw, don't get so sore," he replied. "I'm touchy in one spot, that's all. Let's talk about something else. I was reading a book called First Street the other day—it's highbrow, you know, but it's darn popular, too. I hear they've sold a hundred thousand. It tells all about how gossipy-like and narrow-minded and, oh, just small, people are—the people that live in those little burgs. . . . Say, the more I find out about



this world of ours the less I like it. Why the devil can't people leave each other alone, and do what they want, long's they're not hurting anybody."

His last words made Blanche sympathize with him, in spite of the fact that, to her, there was an unmanly element in what he said. Real men, now, went out and fought with each other, and "stood the gaff" and "got what was coming to them" and made people obey them. Still there *was* too darn much bossing in the world, with ev'rybody sticking his finger in the other person's pie. Her family was always nagging at her, and the owner of the cafeteria was always telling her what to do—thought he owned her for his measly twenty-two a week—and the cop on the corner gave you a rotten look if he saw you walking alone late at night . . . yes, too darn much bossing to suit her.

"What's that there word, narruh-mindud, 'r something like that—what's it mean?" she asked.

"It means when you don't see nothing except what's right in front of your eyes," he answered, delighted at the chance to show his wisdom. "That's what ails most of us, all right. When you're narrow-minded, you see, you want everybody to be like you are and you go right up in the air when people don't act the way you do. That's what it means."

"But you've got to be like other people 'r else you'll never get anywheres," she said, uncertainly.

"Well, yes, in lots of things," he answered, "but just the same you can't be arrested for what's going on in your head. You c'n have all the ideas you want



to, 's long as you don't pull off any crime, 'r bother anybody."

She liked the queerness of his words, for no discernible reason other than that he seemed to be in favor of "standing up for yourself," and not always believing what people told you. Not so bad at that, only—try—and—do—it! Oh, well, what did all this have to do with the night ahead of them? This funny boy was her escort for the night, and she was a desirable woman, and she wished that he would "cut out" all of the heavy stuff and make love to her, or pay her some compliments, or do something that men did when they were "gone" on a girl.

"Say, you never kill yourself paying any attention to *me*," she said, after a pause. "It's always them i-i-deeuhs uh yours. Why, I know piles uh men that would jump all over themselves just for the chance to sit 'longside uh me here."

He had been looking away from her, and now he turned his head, stung, and sorrowfully hungry, and much more upset than he dared to confess to himself, as he took in the appetizing, fresh sauciness of her face, and the suggestive witchcraft of her pent-up breast. There was a come-and-get-me-if-you're-able, and an almost smiling expression on her face. Without realizing it, he always made an additional effort to talk about "deep things" when he was with her, to escape from the unsteady influence which she had upon his emotions. The other girls whom he occasionally took to moving-picture theaters and dances, were more or less inviting to him according to the



shape of their faces—he was fond of very plump cheeks and lips with a large fullness to them—and whether they had ample but not too corpulent forms—but otherwise he did not differentiate them, except in the light of whether they were “good kidders” (brightly loquacious about nothing in particular) or unduly silent and tiresome. Blanche, however, incited within him a quick-rhythmed trouble and respect which he could not explain, outside of his desire to embrace her. She never seemed to have much “brains,” but still he felt that there was something to her that life hadn’t given her a chance to develop—something honest and undismayed.

He had no actual ability at clear thinking, in spite of all of his poor little defiances and boldnesses abstracted from this book and that, but he did have a questioning, dissatisfied spirit—a spirit prone to quick melancholies and even quicker hopes, and always trying to “find out what it all meant.” He had the desire to make Blanche worthy of him, and to give her the knowledges and bystandish rebukes toward life on which he prided himself. He told himself that he was an idealist in sexual matters and that he was waiting for a girl who could show him a clean, aspiring, beautiful love, free from all coquetries and haggings, and he used the impressive adjectives to serenade his sense of sexual frustration. In reality, he was oversexed, and not bold enough to capture the girls whom he secretly desired, but that was not the whole of it—far beneath him he really did long for a physical outlet that would be much less sordid and common than



the ones within his reach. At rare intervals he would visit some professional woman, whose card had been given to him by one of his more rakish friends, and go away from her with a relieved but downcast mood.

While he felt that he was in love with Blanche, he didn't want to be too quick about telling her—you had to wait and be sure that some other girl, even more alluring, wouldn't come along—and since she didn't seem to be in love with him, his pride made him silent at the thought of a probable rejection. Often, when he kissed her good-night, his longing to "go farther" would be close to overpowering him, but at this moment she always slipped efficiently out of his arms and said her last farewell. To Blanche, kisses of any length were equivalents to saying "yes."

As Rosenberg sat beside Blanche now, after her girlishly taunting words, he lost control of himself for the first time, and his hand dropped tightly on one of her knees, but she rose instantly from the bench. She wasn't angry at his having become "fresh" because she blamed herself for it, but at the same time she didn't want to encourage him. He was a nice enough kid, but somehow when he touched her she didn't get any "kick" out of it.

"Not here, Lou—c'mon, let's go," she said, trying to put a look of cajoling promise on her face.

They walked over to "Dreamland," the place where they usually danced. It was a moderately large hall, where the admission price was only two dollars for couples, and it catered to a nondescript array of patrons. Those who attended it regularly were in the



main young blades with small salaries and gay ambitions, and working-girls who desired to "step out" at night, but you could spy a variety of other people who dropped in occasionally. The place hired twelve professional girl dancers, who sat on a row of green wicker chairs and waited for customers, and there was a booth wherein a lady, who looked like a middle-aged, superannuated burlesque actress, dispensed tickets, each of which entitled the bearer to a dance with one of the hired girls. Three or four professional male dancers in tuxedos lolled opposite the girls and waited for feminine patrons. They were mostly in demand for the tango and the Charleston—more intricate dances which most of the other men present had not mastered. Prosperous, middle-aged business men frequently dropped in to dance with the girl "hostesses" and a buxom, overripe, overdressed, smirking woman—who supervised this part of the hall's activities—went through the respectable farce of inquiring each gentleman's name and introducing him to his "hostess" partner. Many youths, "hard up" for the evening and desiring an excellent and "swell-looking" dancer, and many out-of-town visitors, pinning for deviltry during the vacation from their families, were also frequent patrons. In addition, a large number of unattached men drifted about the hall and solicited dances from single girls, who accepted or rejected them according to whether they were well-dressed and talked with the proper confident, wise-cracking inflections. The dance floor covered almost



one-half of the hall's space and was separated by a wooden railing from the remainder of the place.

With its bright green wicker armchairs, and floor of dark red plush, and varicolored electric lights hanging in bunches from the ceiling, and badly done paintings of women and cherubs and flowers on the surface of the walls, and canopied, bedecked platform at one side of the dance floor, where eight jazz players performed, the hall gave you the general effect of spurious romance putting on its best front to hide the decay of its heart. The aura of respectability that hung over the place was an amusing and desperate deception. Two guards stood on the dance floor and reprimanded couples when they shimmied, or moved with a too undulating slowness, and other attendants watched the rows of wicker chairs and censored any open "spooning" among the patrons, and yet the hall was quite patently an inception-ground for rendezvous, and assignations, and flirtations, and covert flesh-pressures. The "hostesses" took soft drinks with their steadiest partners, at one end of the hall, with much touching of knees and flitting of hands under the tables, to induce the men to spend more freely—overrouged and lip-sticked girls, with bobbed hair and plump faces where sex had become the most automatic and shallow of signals. They wore short evening gowns, sleeveless and with low necks, and they "innocently" crossed their legs to show an inch or two of bare flesh above their rolled-up, thinnest stockings, and then uncrossed them again when they perceived that some man was staring at the exposure, keeping



up these back-and-forth movements as though an inuendo with springs and wheels had replaced all of the sexual spontaneity within them.

Blanche and Rosenberg danced again and again to the jerky, moaning, truculently snickering ache and dementia of the music. To Blanche, dancing was the approved, indirect way in which you could relieve your sex without compromising it, and as she was hugged tightly against Rosenberg, he became desirable to her because the music and steps transformed him and cast a rhythmical glamor upon his body. She had the same feeling with any man with whom she danced, unless he was old or inept, and when she danced with a man who was physically attractive off the dance floor as well, the sensation rose to an all-conquering and haughty semiecstasy. Then she held her head high, and closed her eyes occasionally, and wished that darkness would suddenly descend on the floor.

After their first few dances, Blanche and Rosenberg sat down, breathless, and without a thought in their heads. To Rosenberg, dances were opportunities to embrace a girl without interference or remonstrance, but beyond that the music made him feel that he was capering on the divine top of the world, where such dull and mournful things as jobs, and money worries, and alarm clocks, and family quarrels had been deliciously left behind.

In front of Blanche, a bulky, short man, in a dark suit with the latest wide-bottomed trousers, was trying "to make" a dark, barely smiling girl, slender and



dressed in a clinging gray gown, who refused to answer his remarks.

"Gee, I'm as popular around here as the German measles," he said loudly.

The girl smiled more apparently but failed to answer him.

"Listen, just try me once," he begged. "Just one dance. I'll pay the doctor bills if I make you sick. I'm a good sport."

The girl smiled more widely but still remained silent.

"Will somebody tell me why I'm living?" he queried to the air above her head. "Boy, but it's cold tonight! I left the old automatic at home so I can't die just yet, girlie. Come on, just one dance, will you?"

By this time the girl was fully convinced of his glib-tongued, regular-guy status, and felt that he had implored enough to serve as a sufficient payment for his dance. She rose, without a word, and accompanied him to the floor. Similar episodes were being enacted around Blanche and Rosenberg, and he said, with a grin: "It sure gets me when I listen to what you girls fall for. That's why I lose out—I hate to talk that kind of line."

"Oh, go on, you'd do it if you could," answered Blanche. "A girl always likes a fellow 'f he knows how to be funny and don't carry it too far. You know what I mean. I never was so crazy 'bout this kidding stuff myself, but then maybe that's why you like me, isn't it, Lou?"

"You've got something in you, all right," he replied.



"You don't know so much more'n other girls, but you make me feel that you're diff'rent, anyway. I guess it's because you don't put up so much bluffing and leading a fellow on, like other girls do."

She laughed to hide her pleasure at the compliment, and because another part of her said inaudibly: "Oh, I don't, eh? Well, I'll show you, before I'm through!"

"You're a funny fellow, but I've met them worse than you," she said.

They danced until 1 A.M., after which he escorted her to the apartment. As they stood in the musty, narrow, dimly lit hallway, an emotion like a Roman-candle spun around in his breast, and for the first time he grasped her with rough, active hands, and breathed hard as he whispered short, incoherent pleadings. She pushed him back with an undeniable anger and force which made him grow still and dismayed, and they stood for a moment, looking at each other.

"So, you're like all the rest of 'em," she said. "What do you think I am? You've got your nerve, you have. You can't put your hands on me that way, and don't forget it!"

"Well, I'm sorry," he answered, downcast. "I didn't mean to act like that, but something got the better of me. I couldn't think of anything except I wanted you. I'm in love with you, Blanche, and I guess I didn't know it till just now. I'd ask you to marry me to-morrow 'f I had money enough to keep us going."

She softened at this switch to a "decent" proposal, and she reproached herself for having flirted too much



with him without loving him or caring a great deal for his embraces. She liked to hear him talk, but when he touched her he was awkward and hasty, and without that winning blend of confidence and gradual boldness which she liked in a man's approaches.

"I s'pose it's my fault, too," she said. "I don't love you, Lou, but I do like you lots. Maybe I will sometime. How c'n any girl be sure about that? I don' want to stop going with you 'f you'll just try to be friends with me, Lou."

He stood for a moment without answering—discouraged and resentful. Somehow he never seemed to get anything that he really wanted—what was the use of it all. She li-iked the way he talked, oh, yes, but she preferred to save herself for some empty-pated cake-eater, some know-it-all fellow with a straight nose and a bunch of bum jokes and a string of promises about what he was going to do for her.

"Oh, I'll try," he said at last, "but I can't see why you don't care for me. I've got just as good a head as any one else you know, and I'm not so terrible looking, and I know you wouldn't turn me down just 'cause I'm poor."

"I cert'nly wouldn't," she replied. "I can't tell you why I don't love you—it's just not there, that's all. I think you're a nice boy, really I do, and I want to keep seeing you, but what's the use of letting you do things to me when it don't mean nothing? . . . I've got to go upstairs now—I feel like I could sleep ten hours. We sure did dance a lot to-night. Listen, call



me up next Thursday noon, at the caf', and we'll go some place Thursday night."

"All right, I'll give you a ring," he answered, dully. "I guess you can't help how you feel, Blanche."

He kissed her good-night, and she let his lips stay for a while, out of pity, and then broke away from him. As she went to bed, she had a muddled, wondering feeling—why did she always turn down boys that were "good" and willing to marry her, and why didn't she object to the embraces of "bad" men, who were just looking for an easy prospect? Maybe she was a little "bad" herself—a little like May Harrigan, whose name was the jest of the neighborhood, and who grabbed any young fellow that came along. . . . Her perturbations faded out into sleep.

On the next morning she was still a bit glum at the cafeteria, but it was no more than the least of shadows as she exchanged glances and repartee with various customers who paid their checks. When she sat before the cash register, her business-like tension extended even to the sexual side of her, and she uttered her set phrases merely to dispose of the men who talked to her, and with little interest in their faces and words. During the lull-hours, however, between two and four in the afternoon, she relaxed, and the appraising tingles of her sex came back, and she entered into badi-nage with the proprietor and the counter-men and stray customers whom she knew. Her confined perch on the cashier's stool had to be forgotten in some way.

The cafeteria had rows of brightly varnished chairs



with broad arms, and tables with white, enameled tops, and a sprinkle of sawdust on the tiled floor. Pyramids of oranges and grapefruit stood in the windows, and the glass-walled food counters were heaped with pastry, cold meats and trays of salads and puddings. The smell of soggy, overspiced food and body-odors possessed the air, and a spirit of dreamless, hasty, semidirty devouring hung over the place. On this afternoon, Blanche was chatting with the proprietor, a tall Jew of forty years, with a jowled, bloodless face, killed black eyes that were always shifting about in the fear that they might be missing something, and the thickest of lips. His coat was off and he wore an expensive, monogramed silk shirt of green and white stripes, and had a cigar forever in his mouth or hand.

"Check up yet on the accounts?" he asked.

"Yep, ev'rything's straight," she answered.

"Say, I bought a beauty of uh coat f'r my wiff yesterday," he said. "She can't say I ever hold out on *her*."

"Well, isn't that nice—she must be tickled to death," said Blanche, giving him the flattering words that he wanted to hear. "Nobody ever slips me any swell coats."

"Well, if they don't it's your fault," he replied. "You could work a fellow f'r anything you wanted—you've got the goods, all right."

"Aw, quit your kidding," she said. "I wouldn't take no prizes in a beauty show."



"You would if I was one uh the judges," he answered.

He poked her in the side, playfully, and she smiled carefully. You had to take such things from your boss—it was all in the game—but you wished that he would keep his hands to himself—the fat old lobster.

"Any time you wanna take a little ride in my machine, it's there," he said.

"Gee, I'd be afraid of you," she retorted. "I think you're *some* devil, you are."

He chuckled at the praise of his masculine gifts, and walked back to the kitchen in response to a call. The cafeteria was located in a manufacturing and wholesale district where practically all of the trade occurred around the noon hour, and it closed its doors at 6 P.M. When Blanche returned to the apartment, Harry, Philip and Mabel were sitting at the supper table (the father happened to be visiting one of his cronies uptown).

"Say, I met a guy to-day said he saw you at Dream-land las' night," said Philip, when Blanche came to the table.

"Uh-huh, I was there," said Blanche.

"Well, I wouldn't be seen in a bum joint like that," Mabel commented. "You certainly have a gift f'r pickin' out the penny-squeezers, Blanie. Me f'r the Club Breauville, 'r places like that. They put on the best show you ever saw—Hawkins 'n Dale, straight from the Palace Theater, and a big, A-number-one chorus."



"Aw, rats, you're always worrying what a fella's going to spend on you," said Blanche. "They've got a peach of a jazz band at Dreamland, and a dandy floor—that's all I care about."

"Your tastes 'r simply awful," Mabel answered, "and what's more, why shouldn't a girl go with high-class fellas and have 'em spend piles on her? That's what they're made for."

"Well, I don't blame you none," said Philip, "but believe me, I'd never pick out a wife like you. You sure would keep a fella on the go digging it up for you."

"Mabel don't mean anything by it," said his mother, who had come in from the kitchen, "but I wish she wouldn't stay out so late. I get to worryin' when she comes home three an' four an' five in the mornin'. You never can tell what'll happen to a girl in this city."

"Aw, ma, don't fret, I can take care of myself," Mabel said.

"That's what they all say," Harry broke in. "I was talkin' to a fella to-day, said his kid sister got into a scrape out in Jersey. Two guys started scrappin' over her in a machine, and one of 'em's dyin' in the hospital, and the bulls 'r after her. It was in the papers yesterday. You better watch y'r step, Mabe."

"Listen, no girl 'cept a fool would go out in a machine with two guys," answered Mabel. "I'll take 'em one at a time, believe me."

"Well, I do think you're too free with the men, an' you only eighteen," her mother said, looking at Mabel in a ruefully helpless way. "It's I that can't hold you



down, and it's I that never could, but I'm wishin' you'd stay home once 'n a while. How'll you ever get a decint man to make a decint proposal to you, how'll you ever, runnin' round with that fast crowd uh yours?"

"G'wan, she'll land a big one yet, 'fore she's through," said Harry. "Mabe's a wise girlie, and I'm with her all the time!"

"Same here," Mabel answered affectionately, as she pulled her brother's hair.

"I s'pose I'm the boob uh this fam'ly," said Blanche, "but I won't lose no sleep over it. 'F I like the way a man talks, 'n how he looks, I don't care what's the size of his roll."

"You got it from me, you did," her mother said, with a dully soft look. "It's I that married your father when he hadn't a cent to his name. 'Twas the way he could blarney, 'twas that, and 'twas the face of him that made me take him."

"Aw, pa's all right, but he's shy on brains," Mabel said. "'F I ever get hooked up with any man he's got to have plenty uh money, and then some. I'm worth all the dough in the world 'cordin' to my way uh thinkin', and I'm not scrubbin' floors for no fella this year 'r next. This lovin'-up stuff don't get you much."

"Yeh, Blanche is a mut with alla her Rosinburgs, 'n Kellies, 'n all the rest uh them tin-horn pikers," said Harry. "I know how she'll wind up, all right. Some guy'll have her washin' his clothes an makin' her like it!"

"Ma's been washing yours and pa's for years, but you're not kicking about that," answered Blanche.



"Anyway it won't be some one like you. You think that row-mance is something people clean their shoes with, you do. You've got a heart like a oyster, I'll say."

"Row-ma-ance, that's good," answered Harry, derisively. "Try an' cash in on it at the butcher shop an' see what you get."

"Well, I'm on Blanie's side," said Philip, who liked his older sister because she was "softer" than the other members of the family. "When I marry a girl she's got to love me, first, last, 'n' all the time. I'm strong for the jack, sure, but there's other things hanging around."

"Say, isn't Joe Campbell comin' up to-night?" asked Mabel, turning to Blanche.

"Yeh, I've got a date with him f'r eight-thirty."

"Now there's a guy you oughta play up to," said Harry. "He takes down a good three hundred a week f'r that turn he does up at The Golden Mill. Joe's as wise as they make 'em—a wise-crackin' baby. I'm gonna stick around when he comes up here to-night. He c'n get a laugh outa me any day in the year."

"Joe's there, all right," Mabel said. "I wish he wasn't so sweet on Blanche."

"Well, go after him, dearie, if that's how you feel," Blanche answered. "It won't be breaking my heart."

As she dressed herself for the coming engagement, Blanche had an uneven, up-in-the-air song in her blood. Another man would soon be courting her, and casting "I'd-like-to-get-you" looks at her, and deferring to her just as much as if she had been famous or wealthy, and



praising her to lead up to attempted caresses, while she sat in judgment on the proceedings, with a queenly "I'll-have-to-see-about-this" sensation, and remarks made of "slams" and retirings to put him on his mettle, and the feeling of owning the world for a few, high-keyed hours, until she returned to her bed and the more level-headed endurance-test at the cafeteria. Her head was totally empty for a time, and she sang the popular tunes of the day, in a low, contralto voice, as she fussed about with her toilette. Then glimpses of Joe Campbell appeared in her head, and she wondered whether she would ever marry him. She liked him physically, and she respected his money-making talents, but her response toward him was much stronger when he was with her. His absence seemed to remove a black-art spell, and to leave in its place doubts and confusions. Then, beneath all of his good-humors and effulgent generousities, she divined an insincerity and something that spoke of shrouded, patiently crouching intentions. What they were she did not know. Her mind was not capable of delving into this reaction, and it told her only that he wasn't "coming out" with his real self. Her brother had introduced him to her six months previous to this night, and since then Campbell had pursued her in an irregular way, since he frequently left New York on vaudeville-bookings. She had allowed him certain physical liberties and had admonished herself afterwards for being "too easy," but the matter had rested there, since he had never been remarkably insistent in his efforts to vanquish her.

When he came up, and airily saluted her, Harry



and Mabel, who were in the living-room, greeted him effusively. They considered it an honor that this minor Broadway favorite, whose name was occasionally in electric lights, should be so willing to visit them and "step out of his class."

"'Lo, Joe, still bringin' down the house?" asked Mabel.

"Nothing but," he replied. "The bulls came running into the place last night, looking for a free-for-all fight, the clapping was that loud."

Mabel and Harry laughed, and Harry said: "C'mon, I bet you coulda heard a maxim-silencer after you got through."

"That's the same gun they shoot off when you get through fighting, isn't it?" asked Campbell, with a solemn look.

"You win," answered Harry, laughing again.

"Well, I've got to go now," Mabel said. "Papa doesn't like to be kept waitin', you know."

"Be sure and don't leave him anything," Campbell replied. "A girl got expelled from the Flappers' Union the other day—they all got sore at her because she overlooked a ten-spot in the upper vest-pocket."

"You're talkin' to the president of the Union—don't be funny," answered Mabel.

Blanche joined in the laughter now and then—Campbell's humor was hard to resist. A stocky man of medium height, whose feet were always tapping the floor as though they had a light itch to be dancing, he rarely ever departed from the bon-mots that constituted his chief stock-in-trade. His mind was intelligent in worldly



ways, and a blank otherwise, but he was quite aware of his ignorances and careful not to expose them. He had a long, narrow face, with a slanting nose, mobile lips, and a twinkling, lazy cruelty in his eyes. His thick brown hair was burnished and pasted down on his head, and he wore the latest, loose-trouserred clothes, in shades of gray and brown, with multicolored scarves, and a diamond ring on one of his fingers. He was a coarse sensualist grown careless from many feminine captures, and he had held back in Blanche's regard from the feeling that she would "have to come to him first." Still, he was becoming aware of an increasing urge toward her, moved by something in her face and figure that "hit it off just right." She wasn't nearly as pretty as tens of Broadway girls whom he knew, but she had an unspoiled swerve and sturdiness that attracted him, and in addition, he felt that she knew much more than many other women of his acquaintance—that she was not quite as shallow, or as palpably scheming, as most of his retinue were.

He left the apartment with her, and they hailed a taxicab and were driven to his cabaret off Upper Broadway. His turn only came on at eleven o'clock when the after-theater crowd poured into the place, and he sat with Blanche at one of the tables, and endlessly greeted his "friends," and adulterated glasses of ginger-ale with the contents of a silver flask carried in his hip-pocket.

The Golden Mill was a resplendent, baroque cabaret, with a large, electrically lit windmill, made of gold silk stretched over a framework, standing over the



stage. The jazz-band sat just below the stage, between the carpeted runways on which the performers descended to the dance-floor. Men and women, half of them in evening clothes, chattered and laughed at the surrounding tables, with a macabre heartiness that sometimes lessened to betrayals of the underlying dullness.

The whisky began to knock about in Blanche's heart to a cruelly victorious feeling—Campbell thought he was so darn smart, didn't he? Well, he'd have to go some to get her, just the same. Girls were always falling for a celebrity of his kind, and she'd treat him to a novelty. Still, he made her laugh and forget the rest of her world, and she didn't mind if he caressed her to a certain extent (not too much and not too little).

"Y'know, you're a royal-flush to me," said Campbell. "I'd win the pot with you, any day in the year."

"You'll win the air 'f you get too gay," she answered, merrily.

"Now is that nice?" he queried, in tones of mock-reproach. "Daddy'll do anything for you—anything you want."

"I'm not taking things from men this year," she replied.

"Isn't she smart—keeps count of the years 'n' everything," he said. "You'll stop counting when you get to be thirty, old dear."

"Is that the place where you stopped?" she asked.

Campbell winced secretly—he was thirty-five and not particularly elated about it. Blanche always talked



better under the influence of liquor—it loosened her tongue and unearthed an effervescence in her mind: keen as far as it went.

“Take that knife away, Annette—it’s killing me,” he responded, in quavering, melodramatic tones.

Blanche took another sip from her highball.

“D’y’know, I may get crazy some time and ask you to marry me,” he said.

“That’s too bad—it must be worrying you a lot,” answered Blanche. “I never lose my head that way, so look out.”

“But really, I’m strong for you,” he went on. “It’s all in fun most of the time with me, but you’re at the top of the list.”

“I’d hate to bet on your meaning it,” said Blanche, a bit more softly.

“Don’t do it, you couldn’t get any odds,” he answered.

He chucked her under the chin and she slapped his hand.

“What nervous ha-and’s you’ve got,” she said.

“Come on, act as though you didn’t like it,” he retorted.

“That’s the best thing I do,” she replied.

They continued the bantering, with the occasional interruption of a fox-trot, until his “turn” came on, when he left her with an acquaintance of his—a harmless, hero-worshiping chorus man in a dark suit, whose ruddy, regular-featured face had a look that was perilously near to a pout. Then Campbell appeared in white duck trousers, a dark blue coat, black shoes,



and a panama-straw hat, and did clog-dances, and sang in a hard tenor voice, at the head of a bare-legged chorus dressed in very short boyish trousers of red, and indigo low-necked vests, and gaudy caps slanting on their heads. He was a nimble dancer and had a powerful voice, and could have risen to a point near the head of his profession, if laziness and undue dissipation had not held him down. When his act had finished and he had cleaned the make-up from his face, he returned to the table and remained there with Blanche until 2 A. M.. After they left the place they entered a cab and he said: "What d' you say to coming up to my joint for a while—I'm harmless, girlie, I won't make you cry on mother's shoulder."

"You are, and you're going to stay that way," she answered. "C'mon now, tell James to drive over to Ninth Avenue, old dear."

He made a grimace and did as she requested. He'd get her yet, no fear, but there was no need for hurrying. It was always a fatal move to expostulate with a woman at such a juncture. Again, she wasn't important enough to *him* for any come-downs.

In the taxicab, he hugged and kissed her, and though she made little resistance, an alertness contended against the liquor-fumes in her head and counseled her to "look out." As they stood in the hallway of her building he became a trifle bolder, and she was passive for a while and then stopped him. It wasn't easy to hold out against him, and she had barely been able to check the rising dizziness within her, but she simply couldn't let him win her as lightly.



as this. She had not drunk sufficiently to reach a gigglingly helpless mood, although everything *did* seem to be jovially unimportant, and a dislike of him rose within her. He was too confident, he was. She'd teach him a lesson, she would, in spite of all of his physical appeal and his pleasant nerviness.

"You're a little too fast—I can't keep up with you," she said. "Besides, I'm getting the willies standing here all the time. Be a good boy now, and let me go upstairs."

"All right, girlie—game's over," he replied, gracefully taking his defeat. "How about next Saturday—eight 'r so?"

"That suits, I'll be on deck," she said.

He kissed her again and went out to the waiting taxicab. As she entered her room she had a droopy, misty feeling. Oh, well, another man turned down—what did *she* get out of it, anyway? It was funny, you wanted to and you didn't want to at the same time. She blinked at herself in the mirror, and then turned out the light and went to sleep.



## CHAPTER II

THE late spring evening extracted lights from the twilight on Ninth Avenue, like some pacing conjurer producing tiny, molten rabbits from his trailing, unseen sleeves. Blanche walked along the street, on her way home from the cafeteria, and her high heels scuffed on the dirty cement sidewalk with a weary evenness. It was all right to say that sitting on a stool all day rested your legs, but the energy that went from your arms and head drew its penalty from all of your body. That cafeteria was finally "getting on her nerves"—the place had changed proprietors a few weeks before, and the new owner, a furtive-faced man of thirty, who considered himself to be an invincible Don Juan, always hovered about Blanche's stand as much as he could and continually touched her in ways that made it hard for her to conceal her ire. She had run out of all of her tactfully laughing withdrawals, and momentary submissions when the gesture was not "too raw," and the situation had reached a straining-point. It would not have been so bad if he had been good-looking, or if he had sought to lavish gifts upon her, but here he was a man with a long nose and a spindly body, making advances to her because she was an employee of his at twenty-three a week—the nerve of him! She would quit the place to-morrow if he tried another thing.



A year had passed since her last spring night with Campbell at The Golden Mill, and she was now a little over twenty-one. Her figure had grown less bottom-heavy, and her bosom had curved out a bit, and her face was more resolved and inquiring beneath the many ignorances that still remained. A deeper, half hopeless question had crept into her bluish-gray eyes—an untutored I'd-like-to-know-what-it's-all-about look—and her wide lips had come together more closely and lost some of their loose thoughtlessness. Very dimly, she had even commenced to see flaws and credulities in her hitherto uninspected family, especially in her father and her brother Harry, whose endless strut and domineering words had become more of a palpable bluff to her. Yet, at the same time, she still accepted her environs without much anger or revolt, because, after all, they were real, and near-at-hand, and seemingly permanent, and because they still held nightly escapes, and laughing conquests at parties, and dance halls, and cabarets. The only one possibility of a change was marriage, and she dreaded this loophole because it meant being tied down to one man and losing the delicious sense of juggling several men to the stress of her whims. At times she toyed with the dream of becoming the mistress of a wealthy and at least endurable man—plenty of women “got away with it,” and what was hindering her?—but it never more than flitted through her mind because her life had always pounded into her the fact that a girl had to be “respectable” at all costs, had to cling to an indignant pose of keeping men at arm’s length, so that



she could look the world in the face with the glad knowledge that it was unaware of her "personal" relentings and sins. Otherwise, the girl definitely cut herself off from all safeguards and reassurances, and was regarded with contemptuous smiles, and lightly spoken of. Again, Blanche had just insight enough to see what the outcome might be if she lived with such a man or allowed him to maintain an apartment for her—to see a hint of the querulous boredoms and the eventual separation that would ensue unless she was really "crazy" about the man. Of course, she merely translated it into the statement that she was not "cut out" for such a life.

During the past year, Campbell had been away twice on long vaudeville tours, and while he was in New York, her refusals to succumb to him had piqued him to a point where he called her up at much longer intervals. What the devil—he wasn't so "hard up" that he had to chase after a cafeteria cashier who was probably merely intent on getting a "good time" out of him. He could not quite dismiss her from his mind—she had a proud twist to her which he liked in spite of himself, and his vanity always made him believe that he would eventually subdue her—and the impulse to see her again came back to him during his weariest moods—after an unusually pronounced jag, for instance, when he was "sore at the world" and when his head throbbed heavily, for at such times she always beckoned to him as a fresher and less solved feminine variation.

Blanche's attitude toward him had narrowed down



to a sentence which she had once said to herself: " 'F he ever asks me to marry him, maybe I will, maybe, but he's not going to get me like he does other girls, not 'f he was the Prince uh Wales himself!" During the past year she had been more steadily in the company of Rosenberg—he was a necessity to her because he "knew more" than the other men in her life and could assist the feeble stirrings and problems that were beginning to spring up in her mind. He was still unattractive to her in a physical way—a very bright, good boy, but not the broad-chested, wise and yet tender man who constituted her hazy ideal—but she had permitted him embraces of greater intimacy, out of the feeling that it wasn't right to take so much from him and give him nothing in return, although she refrained from any semblance of a full surrender. He frequently loaned her books, through which she stumbled with amusement and awe—she could not understand most of what they said (it sure was "bug-house"), but when he sought to explain it to her it grew a bit clearer, and she had glimpses of men and women in the novels, who lived more freely and searchingly than she did, and who saw and spoke of "all sorts of strange things" that she had never dreamt of—com-plex-es, and inhibishuns, and hunting for bee-oo-ty, and boldly telling life how double-faced it was, and living your own life with a laugh at the objections of other people, and always looking for something that stood behind something else. They formed themselves into perplexing lures that could never be quite



banished from her mind, and became "stronger" when she was in her "bluest" moods.

Rosenberg had found another girl—a blonde, slim chatterer, who tried to write poetry between her labors as a stenographer, and worshiped his "won-der-ful brain," but although this girl had become his mistress, he never regarded her with more than a flattered satisfaction and still saw Blanche once a week. He could not rid himself of the hope that Blanche might finally love him and marry him, and the other girl's glib professions of culture and creative aspiration were never as appealing as Blanche's stumbling and honest questions. He saw "something big" in Blanche and wanted to extract it from her and bask in its warm emancipations.

. . . . .

When Blanche entered the living-room of her home she found that Harry and her father were in her bedroom, engaging in a highly secret confab with another man. Still resenting her day at the cafeteria, and vexed at this invasion of her private domain, she burst into anger before Philip and Mabel, who were seated at the table and waiting for the mother to bring the supper in.

"Say, what right've they to go in my room?" she asked. "Think I want some fella to see my slip-ons 'n' things hanging around, and maybe sitting on my bed? I'm not going to stand for it!"

"Hush up, don't let them hear you," said Mabel. "I know how you feel, sure, but then it don't happen ev'ry night. They got something up their sleeves, and



they don't even want the resta us to hear about it. I don't see why Harry and pa can't trust their own fam'ly, though."

"They're cooking up something about Harry's next scrap," said Philip. "He's in there with Bill Rainey, and Rainey's managing this here Young Thomas, the kid Harry's gonna fight Friday night."

"Well, I'll stand it once, but they'd better not pull it off again," Blanche responded, as she removed her hat and her spring coat. "My room's my own place and I don't want any strange men looking it over."

Her anger had gone down to a quieter sullenness.

"Come on, Blan, get off the high perch," Philip said. "We'll all be rolling in money if the thing comes through."

"B'lieve me, Harry's going to get into trouble yet with all this crooked stuff of his," Blanche replied. "He can't even fight on the level any more."

"Well, I don't blame Harry one bit," Mabel said. "He's just got to play the old game, that's all. He won his las' bout hands down and they went and give the verdict to the other fellow."

"You can't be a goody-goody and come out on top in this burg," Philip said, moodily. "I don't b'lieve in stealing 'r holding anybody up, but just the same you've got to be as tricky as the other side, I'm telling you."

"That's always the line around here, but I'm not so sure about it," Blanche answered. "There's plenty of people that get by 'cause they can do things better'n other people—'cause they've got brains in their heads



and not a lotta excuses. 'F ev'rybody was dishonest all the time, they couldn't make jails large enough to hold 'em. I'm getting tired of all this fake and fake and fake around here. It looks like a bum excuse to me."

"Since when've you become so up'n the air?" asked Mabel. "You've been listenin' some more to your Rosinburgs, 'n Smiths, 'n all the resta them—fellas that walk round without a cent in their pockets, 'n' tell you how stra-aight they are, 'n' talk like they owned the earth. They give me a pain in the back. Harry's tryin' to make some real money so we c'n all move outa this shack here, but *you* never give him any credit."

"Have it your own way," Blanche replied, with a light disgust. "You won't talk like that 'f the p'lice ever come up here looking for him."

"That's what I'm always afraid of," said the mother, who had come in from the kitchen. "I get turribul dreams all the time, turribul, an' I c'n always see your father an' Harry sittin' in jail. I've always said it's no use bein' dishonest, no use. It's not the right way uh actin', it's not, an' you always get punished for it. I'd much rather live just like we are, plain an' decint-like, an' not be worryin' all the time."

"I know how you feel 'bout it, ma," said Blanche, patting her mother's shoulder and stroking her hair, "but there's no use in saying anything. Try and tell something to Harry and pa—just try!"

"Aw, ma, don't be so foolish," Mabel said, with affection and condescending pity mingled, as she



pinched her mother's cheek. "'F you went round like I do, an' saw what was goin' on, you wouldn't be so worried. Why, there's fellas gettin' away with murder all the time, an' nobody touches them. Big ones, too, the bigges' they've got in this burg."

"Well, I think ma's right, in a way," said Philip, cautiously, "but she don't know what Harry's up against. You can't be straight in this scrapping game."

"It's I that always tried to raise all of you to be honest an' good—it's no fault uh mine, it's not," his mother said, mournfully, as she returned to the kitchen.

The door of Blanche's room opened and the two Palmers emerged with Rainey, the rival manager. Rainey was a tall, beefy man with a paunch, who wore an immaculate suit of brown checks and sported a gray derby hat and a heavy gold chain on his white linen vest. He was almost totally bald, and his smoothly ruddy face had the look of a politician who had just kissed an unusually homely infant, in the interest of his election. He uttered a few brightly bovine compliments to the women and then departed, after a last whispered talk with the father outside of the apartment door.

"Say, what's the idea of keepin' us outside?" asked Mabel, peevishly, after her father had returned. "You oughta know we're safe, you ought."

"What you don't know won't hurt you none," her father answered, rubbing a finger over his thick lips. "Anybody'll start blabbin' when he gets a little booze in him—'specially a woman."

"Aw, we know what it's all about," said Philip.



"They're pointing Thomas f'r a go with the champion, and Harry's one guy *he* can't beat, an' he knows it. What's Rainey going to hand out f'r Harry's putting the wraps on, that's what I'd like to know."

"Listen, talk about somethin' else," Harry said, surlily.

He was a bit ashamed of his rôle in the affair—not from a sense of guilt but because it was a refutation of his two-fisted supremacy—and a bit childishly fearful that the "frame-up" would be discovered if any one, even a member of his family, conversed on the subject.

"You people sure hate to mind your own business," he went on.

"That's right, lay off," said the father. "We'll be havin' thousands nex' week, 'f ev'rythin' goes right—I'll tell yuh that much—but I don't want none of yuh to start blah-blahin' all over the place. You girls wanna keep a close mouth, d'yuh hear me?"

"Oh, hush up, you never give us a chance to say anythin'—you're always gabbin' yourself," Mabel said, petulantly, as she went into her room.

"I'll bet both of you get into a peck of trouble before you're through, but it's not my funeral," said Blanche, in a spirit of weary indifference.

"Stop croakin' all the time, will yuh," answered Harry. "You talk like you was anxious f'r us to get in bad, you do."

"Oh, let's drop it—you never pay any attention to what I say," she replied. "I'm just looking on—don't mind me."



"Well, see that yuh don't do nothin' but look," her father admonished. "You've been havin' too damn much to say, these days."

Blanche repressed her irritation and retired to prepare for her night's engagement. She was to meet a boy named Fred Roper at the corner drug store, and hints of coming gayety strove to dispel her darker feelings. She'd get away from her family some time, even if she had to wind up by marrying a hunchback with one eye, never fear, but in the meantime there was nothing that she could do. Almost unconsciously, she had begun to classify the members of her family in general ways that were far from complimentary. Her mother was a weak, abused woman; her father was brainless, and conceited, and bossy; Harry was an ill-tempered bully and gangster; Mabel thought of nothing but deceiving men and landing a wealthy one; and Phil was afraid of his shadow, and never taking sides. Still, they were *her* family, and it was necessary to "stick up" for them—a great deal to other people and even a little to herself—and in spite of their faults they *did* love each other, and they *were* generous to each other, and, after all, they were no worse than most of the people in the world, as far as she could see. She would always be loyal to them, sure, but she did want to get off by herself, and be independent, and not bear the brunt of their orders, and displeasures, and knaveries, and to achieve this she would probably have to pay the penalty of marrying some man whom she did not love, but who could comfortably provide for her. What could she do herself—she had no par-



ticular talent or ability (she was getting wise to that), and it seemed to be a toss-up between working like a Turk and doing more as she pleased in a home of her own. She would never accept any large sums of money from her family, even if her brother's dishonest schemes should succeed, because she would never be able to feel right about it—she didn't want money that was "dirty" and not her own.

Her mood was unduly reckless as she walked down Ninth Avenue to meet her "boy-friend," for she had a reaction to "forget the whole thing" for the night, at least. In her light brown coat, thinly trimmed with cheap white rabbit-fur at the bottom and top, and her short black and lavender *crêpe-de-chine* dress, and the round, gray hat snugly fitting over her bobbed hair, she had the self-contained, jauntily ordinary look of scores of other girls tripping down the street. Her escort of the evening, Fred Roper, was a pimply-faced, stocky youth, with sandy hair and lascivious eyes. He dressed in expensive gray-checked suits, and wore a narrow-brimmed, black derby hat, and regarded himself as one of the Beau Brummells of the neighborhood. He worked on and off as a clerk in a Ninth Avenue cigar store, but his main passion and source of revenue was playing the races, and his financial state varied from hundreds of dollars on one week to being "broke" and borrowing money on the next. On this night he had "cleaned up" on a ten-to-one shot at Belmont Park, and he had the truculent swagger of the successful and not yet hardened gambler, who feels that he is the darling of chance and need only lift a finger



to cow anything in the world. Blanche considered him to be an aimless fool—one of the hordes of bozoes who were always trying to get something for nothing—but since he was willing to spend money freely for her entertainment, she saw no reason for refusing to accompany him now and then. Also, he was a good dancer, and so far had never sought to do more than kiss her—a contact which always had to be endured as a payment for your evening's fun. She knew, of course, that he was "laying for her," and would sooner or later attempt to seduce her, but that was the element of lurking risk that prevented such occurrences from becoming too stale and peaceful—it gave you the watchful tingle, and the sought-after feeling, that established your feminine importance, even though you disdained the man in question and had no intention of responding to him.

"'Lo, Blanche, how's the girlie?" he asked, when she had walked up to him at the drug-store entrance.

"Fine as silk," she answered.

They stepped to the curb-stone and looked for an empty taxicab among those that rolled by.

"What d'you wanna do to-night?" he asked.

"Well, let's see, I guess I'd better leave you car-fare," said Blanche, impudently.

"I can't laugh to-night, my lip hurts," he responded. "I raked in a coupla hundred on the fifth race to-day, so don't let that part of it worry you none."

"How about a show, and then the Breauville afterwards?" asked Blanche.



"You're on," he replied. "You'll meet a lotta guys before you find one's loose as I am, girlie."

"I know—you're a peach, Fred," she answered, putting a note of cajoling praise in her voice.

They rode in a cab to a Broadway theater, where he purchased the best orchestra seats. The show was one of those musical revues—"The Strolling Models of 1925"—where fully endowed, and slenderly semi-chubby, chorus girls revealed everything except the extreme middle portion of their anatomies, and pranced and kicked about the stage, with a manufactured blitheness and a perfect cohesion; and where male and female dancers pounded, leapt, and whirled, like inhumanly nimble and secretly bored manikins; and where the scenes were rococo or minutely simple—multicolored Chinese scenes, Oriental harem scenes, streets on the Bowery, Russian peasant festivals; and where the music and songs were either sweetly languorous or full of a rattling, tattling sensuality. The music had a precarious charm, a charm that could not bear much reiteration but just failed to be obvious at a first hearing.

Blanche sat, transported, and sorry that she had to return to her partner between the scenes. This was the life—throwing up your head and winking an eye at all invitations, like you had a first mortgage on the earth! She envied the girls on the stage, even though she knew something of the labors and uncertainties attached to their profession. How she wished that she, too, could do something different, and get applauded for



it, and lose the buried sense that often recurred to her.

After the show she went with Roper to the Club Breauville, a private hang-out off upper Broadway. The place was plastered with frescoes and decorations in gilt, red, and purple, and had a jazz-orchestra of ten men. It prided itself upon its air of gleeful informality—a spirit of natural good-fellowship—although you divined that all of the uproar was doing its best to hide the passage of money, and a less humorous sensual game. Theatrical celebrities were hailed at the tables and asked to make speeches, or give impromptu performances, and people spoke to each other without an introduction, and a stout hostess in a black and silver jet evening gown wandered among the tables and made witty remarks to everybody, and never lost her “I’m-doing-it-to-keep-you-amused” mien. As Blanche and Roper followed the head waiter to a table, the hostess, who had chemically yellowed, abundant hair, and a round, fake-babyish face, was bandying words with a group of tall, rakish men in tuxedos.

“D’you hear the latest?” she asked. “They’re going to give all the chorines a machine and a diamond bracelet to keep them honest.”

“Rockefeller’s donating a million to the cause.”

“Pass that pipe around and we’ll all take a whiff,” answered one of the men.

“I’ll give you the needle instead—I sold the pipe to a stock-broker this morning,” she answered.



The man laughed at this jibe at their profession, and the hostess turned to another table.

Champagne was sold at fifteen dollars a bottle, and Roper spent his money lavishly, in the effort to impress Blanche. When the second bottle came she drank sparingly—you grew too darn careless if you drank too much, and then you frankly “bawled out” the fellow with you, or let him take too many liberties. Sometimes the matter passed out of your control and you became merrily hazy about everything, but you had to fight against such an ending. Roper drank freely and passed into an inebriated condition that was sullen and hilarious at different times. This girl would have to be good to him to-night—he had played around with her long enough—but he would have to laugh it off for a few hours, until his chance came.

As they rode away in a cab, he kissed her, and she made no remonstrances. It was all part of the system—a kiss or two at the start of the evening, and allowing the man to hug you a little too closely sometimes, while you were dancing, and then some more kisses during the ride home, with a few “Don’t, please don’ts” thrown in to provide the proper touch of objection. Then Roper became more daringly insistent, and she spoke indignantly over an inner sigh. Here it was again, the old finale.

“You musn’t do that to me,” she said. “I don’t like you well enough for that, Fred. I mean it. I’m not a bad sport, and I’m willing to go so far, but I won’t give in to a fellow ’less I really care for him. That’s the way I’m made.”



Roper's drunkenness gave him an irresistible anger—if this girl thought he was a "sucker" he'd soon correct her.

"You're gonna come across with me," he said. "I'm jes' as good's any other fellow, 'n' I've been treatin' you white, an' you know it. What's the idea, stringin' me along like this?"

"'F you can't talk decent to me I'll leave the cab," she replied, really aggravated this time. "I never promised you anything, and 'f you wanted to take me out, that was up to you."

For a moment, caution contended against Roper's drunkenness.

"Aw, can't you be nice to me?" he asked, trying to resume his overtures. "You know I'm crazy 'bout you, you know that."

"I can't be like you want me to," she answered, as she pushed him away.

This time, a rage took full possession of his muddled head.

"Suppose I stop the cab an' let you get out," he said. "You're too damn stuck up to suit me, an' I won't stand f'r any more of it, see? You're nothin' but a lousy gold-digger, you are!"

A cool sneer rose up within Blanche—she'd "call his bluff" this time, and show him that he couldn't insult *her* with impunity. She tapped on the glass panel and stopped the cab. Roper tried to detain her, but she shook off his hands and stepped out to the pavement. The cab driver looked on with a quizzical ennui—this thing happened in his cab at least once every night.



"C'm on back, Blanche, I'll be good," Roper cried, but she ignored him and strode down the street.

He followed her in the cab to the next corner, repeating his entreaties and not quite daring to leap after her, but the presence of an inquisitive policeman caused him to abandon the chase, with a final oath. As she walked home, Blanche had a feeling of relief and of self-reproach. She had taught this fellow a lesson, but what was the sense of such happenings? She couldn't dismiss a twinge of guilt at having taken his entertainment and then rejected him, but what could a girl do—sit at home all the time and watch the walls? Oh, darn, it was all a mess, all right.

On the following morning at the cafeteria, she had a heavy head and a scarcely veiled sulkiness. If Harrison, the proprietor, started anything now, she'd have to quit her job—it was about time that men found out that they couldn't treat her as though she were a bag of oatmeal! Nothing occurred until the middle of the afternoon, when Harrison, a tall, thin man with a long nose and blinking eyes beneath his curly brown hair, hung around her desk.

"Wanna go somewheres to-night?" he asked.

"No, thanks, I've got 'n engagement," she replied, trying to make her voice a little cordial.

"Say, you're always turnin' me down," he said. "What's the matter, don't I look good to you?"

"Oh, you're all right," she answered, "but I can't help it 'f I'm usually dated up. There's a lot of men in this town, you'd be surprised, and there's only seven days in the week, y' know."



"Don't stall around so much," he said. "Come on, let's go to a show to-night, what do you say? You know you like me, Blanche, sure you do. You just wanted to see how often I'd ask you, that's it."

He accompanied his words by placing a hand upon one of her hips, and this time her endurance fled.

"I'm leaving to-night—you'll have to find another cashier," she said, coolly. "Try all of this stuff on some other girl and see how she likes it."

He looked at her for a moment, with a heavy incredulity, and then broke into wrath—this girl thought she was better than he was, eh?

"You can't leave too soon to suit me," he said. "You act like you was Queen of Hoboken, 'r something like that! I'll pay you off to-night, and good riddance!"

"'F I had your conceit I'd think I was a queen, all right," she replied, as she went on punching the register.

"You give me a pain," he retorted, as he walked away.

She looked after him with an immense relief. Thank the Lord, this was over at last.

As she walked to her home that night, she felt an emboldened mood, as though she had asserted herself for the first time in her life. When she broke the news to Mabel, who was sitting in the living-room, her sister was sympathetic.

"You're a darn sight better off away from that place," Mabel said. "Stop workin' for a while an' just step out, Blan. You've got a rest comin' to you."



"I'll say I have," answered Blanche.

For the next week Blanche hung around the apartment, and enjoyed the luxury of rising at ten in the morning and losing the old feeling of drowsy, meek bondage, and went to moving-picture theaters or read some of Rosenberg's books during the afternoon, and romped about with men every other night, but at the end of the week, the relish in her freedom disappeared, and a nervous weariness took its place. She wanted to be doing something again, and to feel that she was earning the right to her nightly pleasures, and to rid herself of the sense that she "didn't amount to anything" and was just hugging her bed to forget about it. To be sure, work was disagreeable and often exhausting, but if you had no other gifts, what else could you do? That phrase that Rosenberg was always using—"expressing yourself"—it kind of got under your skin. Why couldn't she write things, or be an actress, or learn something and teach it to other people, like the men and women whom she read of in the borrowed novels? Well, maybe she would some day, if she ever found out just how to go about it. She was still a mere girl and she didn't intend to be kept down forever. In the meantime, working could prevent her from getting "too blue" about everything—a brisk distraction which was the only one within her reach.

She secured a position in a beauty parlor, giving "waves" to the hair of young women fidgeting over their allurements, and *passé* women rescuing the vanished or vanishing charm, and on the evening of her



first working day she met Rosenberg at their usual street-corner rendezvous.

"Let's just have a talk and not go anywheres to-night," she said, as they walked down the glittering hardness of Forty-second Street.

"I'm with you," he answered, with an elation upon his narrow face.

When a girl didn't want you to spend anything on her, and yet desired to be with you, it was an exquisitely promising sign, and perhaps Blanche had begun to fall in love with him. They sat on one of the stone benches in front of the Public Library building and beneath one of the huge carved lions that guard its portals, and they looked out at Fifth Avenue, with its endless stream of crawling, shiny, smoothly soulless automobiles and busses.

"Look at all those machines, going somewhere and nowhere at the same time," he said, dreamily. "Don't they all look important though, all rolling along in two directions, and still they're just filled with all kinds of people hunting for an evening's fun, that's all."

"S'pose they are, what of it?" she asked. "You've got to get some amusement outa life, haven't you?"

"Oh, if that's all you're after then you're just like an animal," he answered, importantly. "D'you know, sometimes I wonder why people have heads—they hardly ever use them."

"Well, I don't know—I've been using my head some lately but I don't seem to be getting anywheres," she said, dully.



"Maybe you don't see where you ought to go," he replied.

"I cert'nly don't," she responded. "'Less a girl knows how to do something big, she hasn't got a chance. Gee, I wish I was clever and could put it over, like some girls do."

"Why don't you try to write, or go to school and study something?" he asked. "You've got it in you, Blanche, I know you have, but you just don't believe in yourself."

"Me—write?" she queried, with a laugh. "Don't be foolish, Lou. I can't even spell most words straight!"

"You could, 'f you put yourself to it," he answered. "Piles of times you say something with a lot of meaning to it, piles of times, but you don't know what's in you, Blanche. You need to be pushed along and to get some confidence in yourself."

"Maybe I wouldn't like to believe you, huh?" she asked, wistfully. "I feel like I could do things when you talk to me, Lou, and then afterwards it all goes away."

They were silent for a while, and then she said: "Oh, let's forget about it. We're sitting here like a couple of dopes and letting off a lot of easy talking. Talking, that's about all I'm good for, I guess. Let's take a bus ride and see the Avenue."

They boarded one of the green, lumbering busses and sat on the uncovered top. He curved an arm around her waist, and she made no objections. He had a peaceful, heartening influence on her, and she



wondered whether it might not be best to marry him, in spite of the fact that he was physically negative to her. He might help her to make something out of herself. But no, it never worked out. You had to be thrilled and light-headed and upside-down when a man touched you, and if you weren't, you'd soon get tired of having him near you, no matter how much you liked to hear him talk, and how encouraging he was.

When they lingered in the hallway of her building, she let his embraces become more determined, for the first time in many months, moved by her troubled compassion for him. Then she stopped him, and gave him a sorrowful look.

"I'd like to love you, Lou—I'm not kidding," she said.

"Aren't you a lot nearer to it now than you ever were?" he asked, eagerly. "Aren't you?"

"A little bit, maybe," she answered. "You're a good boy, Lou, you are, and I'm always going to be straight with you. I'll never tell you nothing but the truth."

They kissed again, and after they had arranged to meet on the following Monday he walked down the hallway, wondering whether he should dare to hope, and hoping in spite of his wondering.

When Blanche returned from her work, on the next evening, she immediately perceived the downcast looks on the faces of her mother, Philip, and Mabel, who were seated around the living-room table.



"What's this, anyway—'n Irish wake?" she asked. "What's happened?"

"I just couldn't say nothin' this mornin', you'd have been that worried," her mother replied, dolefully.

"Anyway, don't you read the papers?" asked Mabel. "They've got it on the second page of the Herald to-night, an' the Courier, too."

"Harry's been called up before the Boxing Commission," said Philip. "He and pa went down this afternoon, and we're expecting them back any minnit now. There musta been a leak somewhere 'bout that fake scrap he pulled night before last. They're after him hot and heavy, and the Club wouldn't pay him off to-day, and I think Rainey's double-crossed him in the bargain. It looks bad all right for poor Harry!"

"Didn't I know this was going to happen," Blanche exclaimed. "I did think he'd get away with it once 'r twice, though, before they caught him. You've got to have brains 'f you want to be a crook in this world."

"Oh, stop this I-told-yuh-so line," answered Mabel. "Harry was only trying to look out for the rest of us, and I'm darn sorry for him."

"Well, I'm not," Blanche replied, determinedly. "He needed something to take the swelled head out of him, he did, and I'll say it even 'f he is my own brother."

"I only hope it'll make all of you listen more to your ma," said Mrs. Palmer. "There's never no good in tryin' to make money dishonest-like. It's happy I'll feel 'f Harry 'll only go to work now, an' give up alla that fightin' and bummin' around like he does."



"Well, Harry's not down yet, I'm saying," Philip interposed. "B'lieve me, he'll fix the guys that did him dirty, and he'll do a good job of it, too!"

"Yeh, and get into jail for doing it," said Blanche, as she walked into her room.

"Don't talk like you wished it on him," Mabel called after her, irritably.

As Blanche changed to a kimono, she tried to feel sympathetic toward Harry, but she could not down her sneaking satisfaction at his misfortune. Somehow, it was difficult to engender affection toward this rough-neck, never-seeing, cocksure brother of hers. Of course, a man wasn't a man unless he used his fists and his voice with a hard efficiency, but Harry carried his masculinity to an overbearing extreme, and never paid any attention to your side of the question, and seemed to have a meanness—a go-to-hell spirit—which could instantly be awakened by the slightest opposition. His dishonesty didn't annoy her particularly, but she disliked the lame excuses that he always made for it. If he had been an out-and-out hold-up man, she would have respected him far more. Oh, well, he was her brother after all, and maybe this happening would make him more subdued and considerate. Funny, she and her family would be disgraced now, and yet, if he hadn't been found out, they'd still be holding their heads high in the air. "Getting away with it"—that was all people ever seemed to care about.

She heard the voice of her father and brother, and went out to the living-room. They sat slumped down



in chairs, with their hands in their pockets, and scowled down at the linoleum-covered floor.

"It gets my goat, that bastard on the Commish, Murvaney, tellin' me 'Y'r a dis-gra-ace to the ring, Mis-ter Palmer.' Didn't he wink his eye and give Callahan a clean bill when they had all that fuss about the welter champ fight? Sure he did! I'd like to have the coin they slipped him f'r that little stunt."

"What's the use uh beefin'—we're in f'r it," his father answered, dully.

"What did they do to Harry?" Blanche asked.

"They went an' barred him from the ring indef'nitely, the skunks," her father answered. "Thomas an' Rainey only got three months, an' there's somethin' rotten somewhere. 'F we find out they flimflammed us we'll make 'em wish they hadn't! A guy they call Carnavan come down an' swore he'd listened to Rainey an' me fix it all up in the Club on the night of the fight. I saw him hangin' around that night, I saw him, but Rainey said he was a good friend uh his."

"Those two guys 'll be in the hospital before the end uh the week," said Harry. "Watch what I said."

"Oh, what good will it do you 'f you beat them up?" asked Blanche. "I don't want to rub it in, Harry, but you'll get into worse trouble than this, 'f you don't tone down."

"Keep your mouth shut, that's all I want from you," Harry answered. "You're too good to live, you are."

"Well, I think it's a darn shame, Harry," said Mabel, putting an arm around his shoulders.

He squeezed her chin, and his scowl lessened a bit—



he had a "soft spot" for Mabel. She knew that you couldn't get along in this world without being as rotten as the next fellow was, and she appreciated his generosity and his manly qualities, and knew that he was usually the victim of bad luck and that he hardly ever received a "square deal." Blanche, on the other hand, was a coward, always trying to preach at him, and she thought that she was better than he was, and she needed to be "taken down."

"You're the one in this fam'ly I'm strong for," he said to Mabel. "You c'n have my las' dime any time you want it!"

"Same here," Mabel replied. "Blanche is gettin' too stuck-up these days, an' she thinks she knows it all."

"Well, she'd better lay offa me," he said, ominously.

"You just can't stand it when any one tells you you're wrong," Blanche retorted.

"How about me, Harry, you know I'm always with you," Philip said.

"Oh, you're all right, but you need more guts," Harry answered. "You don't know enough to go out an' get what's comin' to you."

"'F I was a scrapper like you, maybe I would," said Philip. "I don't take any sass from anybody 'f I can help it, you know that, Harry."

"It's not right f'r you an' Blanche to be always fightin' like this," said Mrs. Palmer, turning to Harry. "It's I that wish you'd be nice to each other, like a brother an' sister should. I don't think you done right, I don't, but it's no good pitchin' into you now. Maybe



you'll be a good, honest boy from now on, maybe you will."

"You mean well, ma, but you don't know what I'm up against," Harry answered, as he patted her head in a clumsy, reluctant way.

"You make me sick, Kate," the father broke in. "Didn't you an' me work hard f'r years, didn't we, an' what did we get out of it, what did we get? Nothin' but trouble, I'll say! You an' Blanche leave Harry alone, 'r you'll hear from me. He got a bum deal this time, but he'll be out on top, 'fore it's over."

"Yeh, I've got confidence in Harry," said Philip, giving his brother a look of respect tempered with more secret annoyance. "He knows how to handle himself."

"Well, I don't want my own boy to get behind the bars, an' he will 'f he don't behave himself more," Mrs. Palmer said, in a weakly lamenting voice, as she shuffled back to the kitchen.

Blanche, who had no engagement for the night, went to a neighboring moving-picture show and saw a film called "Nell of the Yukon," in which a dimpled statuesque actress named Dorothy Darling—a lady in her desperately preserved, early thirties—smiled, and frowned, and struggled, without subtlety but with much animal abandonment wasted on the impossible tale. She played the part of a speckled but not quite approachable dance-hall girl in a mining camp in Alaska, and she was in love with a handsome young gambler who had incurred the enmity of the saloon and dance-hall proprietor. Of course, the gambler



was the only honest one in the place, and, of course, he protected her from the proprietor, whose intentions toward her were, alas, horribly immoral, and, of course, the gambler was also loved by another jealous dance-hall girl, who became the tool of the unscrupulous proprietor. The second girl trapped the gambler in her room and, after he had gently repulsed her pleadings, delivered him to the ambushade of the villainous proprietor and his cohorts. He was about to be slain by this oddly hesitant and delaying villain when Nell of the Yukon rescued him, at the head of a band of his mining-camp friends.

As Blanche looked on at the film, she had an excited interest that sometimes lessened to a sense of the absurd. It *was* "sort uh silly," to be sure, especially that scene where Nell fought against the proprietor, in her room, and suffered no casualties except the tearing of the upper part of her waist, and the loosening of her hair. No girl ever got off that easy when a strapping fellow had her cornered and was out to do her wrong! But still, the story was a glimpse into another fabricated world, far more enticing than her own, and in her eagerness to forget the immediate facts in her life, Blanche devoured the colossal unreality of the film with only an occasional qualm. Afterwards, as she walked down Ninth Avenue, she had an odd mood—too tired to be discontented, and yet carrying the suggestion that life was purposeless and that there was "nothing much to it." The mood stayed with her as she rested prone on the bed in her little room.



### CHAPTER III

IN the twenties, years slip by with the flimsy rapidity of soap-bubbles blown from the breath of time, unless the person experiencing them has found an unusually cloistered or passionless existence. As Blanche sat in the Beauty Parlor where she worked as a hair-curler, she remembered that she was twenty-two and that her birthday was only twenty-four hours distant.

The year which had elapsed since her brother's expulsion as a prize-fighter seemed to be little more than a crowded and instructive month. As she sat in the Parlor, during an afternoon's pause between patrons, she said to herself: "Gee, here I am, already twenty-two! I'll be 'n old dame before I know it. It's enough to give you the jimjams, it is." Something that was not wisdom but rather an engrossed search for wisdom rested on the smooth plumpness of her face. Again, a light within her eyes came near to the quality of self-possessed skepticism and shifted against the survival of former hesitations and faiths. Life to her was no longer a conforming welter of sexual advances and retreats, with moments of self-disapproval bearing the indistinct desire "to get somewhere"—thoughts and emotions had snapped within her; problems were assuming a more unmistakable shape; the people in life were displaying to her more indisputable virtues and faults; and a spirit of revolt was simply waiting for



some proper climax. Her past year of argument and contact with Rosenberg had given her a more assured tongue and a more informed head. The books that he had supplied her with had now crystallized to specific inducements—tales about men and women whose lives were brave, or distressed, pursuits of truth, and an ever keener knowledge of each other, and a sexual freedom that was not merely the dodging of lust to an eventual marriage ceremony, and a dislike for the shams and kowtowings of other men and women. Frequently, she invited the scoffing of her family by remaining at home and reading some novel until well after midnight, with her eyes never leaving the pages. Her sister and brothers, and her parents, felt that she was getting “queer in the dome,” wasting her time like that when she might have been picking up some fellow with serious intentions, or enjoying herself, and though she still went out with men three or four nights of every week, the family were beginning to fear that she was not a “regular” girl and that silly, unwomanly ideas had gotten into her head. In their opinion twenty-two was the age at which a woman should either be married or be moving toward that end, and they couldn’t understand her apathy in this matter. They cast most of the blame on Rosenberg—that dopey mut that she was always afraid to bring around had evidently turned her against her family and filled her with junk from the foolish books he loaned her.

Even her mother had begged her to stop going with him and had complained: “It’s you that’s not me own sweet girl any more. You oughta stop traipsin’ around



with that Jew boy, you oughta. He won't never marry you, and it's I that wouldn't let you, anyways. He's got no money and he's not right in his head, he's not!"

Harry had threatened to "beat up" Rosenberg, if he ever saw him, and her father had railed at her, but she had seemed to look upon their objections as a huge joke, which had angered them all the more but left them powerless to do anything except to lock her in her room at night—an expedient that could hardly be tried on a twenty-two-year-old daughter who earned her own living and could leave the family roof whenever she pleased.

On her own part, Blanche had treated their railings with a perverse resentment. "I'll go on seeing him just to spite them—who're they to boss me around," she had said to herself. In reality, she had lost much of her old respect for Rosenberg's mind and verbal talents, and she was beginning to see flaws in his make-up.

"He never does anything but talk—he's a wonder there," she had said to herself once. "He takes it all out in wind. I'll bet you he'll be working in that library for the rest of his life, 'r in some other place just like it. 'N' again, he always says he's going to write big things, but I never see him doing it. I'd like to meet a fellow that's doing something—making a name for himself. Gee, 'f I could ever run across one of those nov'lists, for instance. That man, Ronald Urban, who wrote *Through The Fields*—wouldn't it be all to the mustard to talk to him! He could tell me all kinds of things I've never dreamt of."



Still, she continued to see Rosenberg because he was the best prospect at hand, and because she pitied his longings for her, and to show her family that she could not be intimidated.

Harry was still barred from the ring, and the family had lapsed back to its old tilts with poverty. Both Blanche and Philip had to give part of their earnings toward the maintenance of the apartment, as well as Mabel, who had gone to work as a dress-model for a wholesale cloak-and-suit firm. She pronounced it "cluck 'n soot," and affected a great disdain for her environs and her Jewish employers, but she was not at all averse to dining and dancing with some of the more prosperous buyers who frequented her place. Harry had become more of a wastrel, and did little except loaf around during the day, with an occasional boot-legging venture and sojourns with women, while the father loitered about poolrooms and complained of his son's persecution, or sat in poker and pinochle games.

As Blanche lolled in the Beauty Parlor, tinkering with her nails, the image of Joe Campbell was in her head. He had ignored her for six months and then had bobbed up again on the previous day, and she had an engagement with him for the coming night. "It's no use—I can't get you out of my head," he had told her over the telephone. "I stopped seeing you because I thought you were playing me for a sucker, but go right ahead, girly, I'll bite again. You're deuces wild and the sky for a limit with me!" "You didn't get hoarse telling me that for the last few months," she had replied, amused and a little flattered. "Sure not,



I was trying to forget you," he had responded. "It can't be done, little girl. Come on now, let daddy act like a millionaire to-night—he's good that way."

When she had mentioned his call to her family, they had all urged her to "make a play for him" and angle for a proposal of marriage.

"He must be nuts about you 'r else he wouldn't always come back for more," Mabel had said. "I'll bet you're always freezin' him out, that's the trouble. You'll be a fool 'f you don't try to land him this time. He's loaded with jack, and he's got a rep, and he's not so bad-lookin' at that. What more d'you want, I'd like to know—you're no Ziegfeld Follies girl yourself."

Now, as she sat and polished her finger-nails, Blanche wondered whether it might not be best to marry Campbell after all. Most of his past glamor to her had been rubbed away, and she saw him as a second-rate actor, always laughing to hide what he wanted to get from a girl, and drinking and spending his money because he wanted people to believe that he was much more important than he really was, and caring nothing for the "fine" part of life which she had begun to realize—books, and paintings, and such things. Still, if she married him he would give her a leisure and an independence in which she could find out whether anything was in her or not, and whether she was gifted for something better than marcelling hair or punching registers. Then she would be able to sit most of the day and just read and think, or maybe go to some school and learn something, and



meet new kinds of people. How could she ever make something out of herself if she had to work hard every day, and give half of her limited dollars to her family, and listen to their naggings and pesterings? Of course, she did not love Campbell, and the thought of continuous physical relations with him was not as pleasant as it had once been—somehow, when you began to “see through” a man’s blusterings and boastings, his hands and his kisses lost part of their thrill—but still, he *was* physically agreeable to her, and it might be idle to hope for more than that from any man. He wouldn’t talk about the new things that she was interested in, or sympathize with her desires for knowledge and expression, but when, oh, when, would she ever find a man who had these responses? Such men lived and moved in a different world, and were hardly likely to meet, or to care for, a questioning Beauty Parlor girl—they could easily procure women who were more their equals. Besides, it was silly to sit and mope around and wait for your “ideal” to arrive. You might wind up by becoming a dull old maid, with nothing accomplished.

The one thing that counseled against marriage to Campbell was her unfounded but instinctive distrust of him. She could never rid herself of the feeling that he was secretly cruel and heartless, and that there was something “phony” about all of his smiles and laughs, and that he was not nearly as intelligent as he seemed to be, but knew how to manipulate an all-seeing pose.

The Beauty Parlor was a sweetly smirking, pink



and whitish, overdraped place, trying so hard to look femininely dainty and insipidly refined and still preserve something of a business-like air. Cream-colored satin panels were nailed to the walls and pink rosebud arrangements shaded all of the electric lights except the green-shaded, practical ones placed beside the tables and the chairs where the work was done. There were Persian rugs on the hardwood floor, and amateurishly piquant batiks, and the reek of cheap incense and dryly dizzy perfume was in the air. Outside of three prosaic, ordinary barber-chairs, the place had several dressing-tables with long mirrors, enameled in shades of ivory and pink with thin, curved legs. Bottles of perfume and jars of paste and powder were scattered over the place, and many framed photographs of actresses were on the walls, most of them signed: "With affection (or with regards) to my dear friend, Madame Jaurette" (some of them had cost Madame a nice penny). These picture-testimonials had a potent effect upon the Beauty Parlor's clientele, owing to the humorous misconception on the part of many women that actresses and society queens alone are acquainted with the mysteries and abracadabras of remaining physically young, beautiful, and un-wrinkled. Photographs of society women were much more difficult for Madame to procure—money was of no avail in their case, ah, *mais non!*—but she did have one of Mrs. Frederick Van Armen, one of the reigning upper-hostesses of the day, which she had secured after a year of plotting, and of pleading notes.

The entire shop had an air of sex running to an



artificial restoration place to repair the ravages of time, or to add an irresistible exterior to its youth, but there was something hopeless and thickly pathetic attached to the atmosphere. It was sex that had lost its self-confidence and its unashamed hungers—sex that hunted for tiny glosses and protections, and had a partly mercenary fear and precision in all of its movements.

Blanche's thoughts of Campbell were interrupted by the advent of the proprietress, Madame Jaurette, and a young patroness. Madame was fat, and too short for her weight, but through the use of brassieres, bodices, reducing exercises, and diets, she had kept her curves from emulating a circus side-show effect. It was a strain on her nerves, however, and she had that persecuted but uncomplaining look on her face. Like a great many middle-class, nearly middle-aged French women, with very moderate educations, she was a preposterous mixture of dense cupidities and romantic sentiments, and while the cupidities had their way with her most of the time, they were always apt to be knocked galley-west by some gentleman with an aquiline nose, or the destitution of some weeping girl. She had a round, almost handsome face, with the wretched hint of a double chin that was never allowed to go any further, and bobbed, black hair—it didn't become her but it had to be mutilated for business reasons—and she dressed in dark, lacy, expensive gowns.

"Ah, Ma'm'selle Palmaire, you will take so good care of Mees White, she is vary fine lady," she babbled. "Mees White, she always have Nanette to



feex her hair, but Nanette she is here no more. Ma'm'selle Palmaire, she is really ex-pert, Mees White. She will geeve you, what you call it?—the curl that won' come off!"

"'F I'm so good, why don't you raise my wages once in a while," Blanche thought to herself, but she said: "Sure, I guess I know my work all right. I'll do the best I can for her."

The patroness was a slim girl with a disproportionately plump bosom, a dumbly child-like, near-pretty face, and a great shock of blonde, bobbed hair. As Blanche heated the curling-irons, the other girl said: "It's just the hardest thing to keep my hair wavy. It never does last more than two or three days. I'll spend a fortune on it before I'm through."

"Why don't you get a permanent wave—it's cheaper in the end," Blanche answered.

"Oh, I'm never able to afford it when I do get the impulse, and then I might want it straight again any time. It's all so much a question of what you're wearing and how you feel, you know. D'you think I look good in curls?"

Blanche had no opinion whatever on the subject, but she replied: "Yes, indeed, I think they go well with your face." Patronesses, to her, were simply blanks to be dealt with in rotation, unless they exhibited an ill-temper or an impatience. A spell of silence came as Blanche bent to her task, and then the other girl said: "Don't you get tired of working all day in this stuffy place? I know I could never stand it myself." Blanche was used to this question—women who tried hard to



show an interest in the beauty-parlor workers but rarely ever really felt it.

"It's no worse than lots of other things," she answered. "I've got to earn my living some way. I won't be here all my life though, believe me."

The conversation continued in this casual strain, with neither woman caring much about what the other said, but with both desiring to lessen the tedium of an hour. Two-thirds of all the words that human beings talk to each other are merely unaffected protections and tilts against an impending boredom.

When Blanche came home from work that night, the members of her family were seated at the supper-table. After she joined them they began to twit her about her approaching engagement with Campbell.

"Gonna make him buy the license, Blanche?" Harry asked.

"Yes, a dog license," she answered.

"That's a fine crack to make against a fellow like Joe," Harry replied. "You're not good enough f'r him, 'f you ask *me*."

"'F you give me one of your hankies I'll cry about it," she said. "Maybe that'll suit you."

Harry looked at her dubiously—it sure was hard to "get her goat" these days.

"You're gettin' sillier ev'ry day," Mabel said to her sister. "You'll never find another chance like Joe Campbell—they don't grow round on bushes. S'pose you'd rather sit all night 'n' read one of those no-ovuls uh yours. It's hard to figure you out."

"In the first place he hasn't asked me to marry him



yet," Blanche answered, "and besides, I don't see why all of you have to butt into my affairs so much. I never tell any of you people what to do."

"Well, don't forget, I'm your father, and I'm gonna have somethin' to say 'bout who you hitch up with," Will Palmer said.

"Nobody'll stop you from saying it, but I'm no good at being bossed around," she retorted coolly.

"We'll see 'bout that, we'll see," her father responded with a heavy emphasis.

This daughter of his was becoming too high-handed, and he would probably have to use harsh measures to her for her own good, but as long as the matter remained one of verbal exchanges there was nothing that he could do about it. Just let her start something, though!

"We're all jes' tryin' to look out f'r you, Blanie dear," her mother said. "You shouldn't get so uppity about it, you shouldn't."

"I can take care of myself—I've had to do it long enough, ma," Blanche responded.

"We'll, I'm with you all the time, and that's no lie," Philip said.

He did not understand Blanche to any great extent, but he liked her independence ("spunk") because it spoke to the similar feeling within himself which he was too cowardly to express.

"You're about the only one in this fam'ly who leaves me alone," Blanche answered, with a little dolorous affection.

She knew that Philip was weak and hedging but she



was grateful for his lack of hard interference and pitied his spineless spirit.

As she dressed to meet Campbell she had a don't-care, tired-out mood. Let them all talk, their heads off—they couldn't prevent *her* from doing what she wanted to do.

When Campbell came up, the rest of her family had departed, with the exception of her mother, who greeted him with a timid cordiality. How she wished that her daughter would marry this good-natured, prosperous man! She herself would have been much better off if she had been more prudent in her youth and not so much concerned with this "lovin' and mushin'" thing. Why, any woman could get to lovin' a man if he took care of her, and acted kind and true, and didn't bother with other women, and had a nice, jolly nature. Of course, Campbell *did* go around with a fast, booze-lapping crowd—she knew what those Broadway people were, but leave it to Blanche to tame him down if she married him. Well, maybe Blanche would come to her senses before it was too late.

When they reached the street, Campbell said to Blanche: "What's on your mind, to-night, old dear? You've said about six words since I came up. You haven't gone back on me, have you?"

"I don't feel much like gabbing to-night," she answered. "I guess I won't be very entertaining to you."

"Just be yourself, that's all I want," he said, as he squeezed her arm. He sensed that something might be "going wrong" with her at home, and after they



had entered a cab he asked: "What's the matter, your family been razzing you any?"

"Oh, they're always doing that," she responded. "They're great ones on telling me what I should do."

"Why don't you make a break?" he queried. "I've always thought you were a fool to stay in that rotten dump of yours. It's no place for a girl with any class to be living in, you know that. You could get a couple of rooms of your own and do as you please, and sit on the top of the world."

He had an idle sympathy for her, and he felt that she would be much more accessible if she were removed from the guardian eyes of her family. Funny, how he couldn't get this girl out of his mind. She had a "thoroughbred" touch, a high-headed, brave, exclusive something that he had rarely found in women and could scarcely define. It wasn't her looks and she certainly wasn't particularly talented in any way—it was a straightness in conduct and word, and an untouched, defiant essence that seemed to cling to the physical part of her. Some women were like that—their affairs with men never left any impress upon them. Guess they never really gave in to any man—that was it. . . . Should he ever ask this girl to marry him? Marriage—brr! Wasn't he still paying alimony on the first one that he had contracted? No, he'd be willing to live with Blanche and give other women "the air," for some time at least, but no more marrying for him. Even this would be quite an important concession for a man of his kind, who could have his pick of pretty girls every night. His first



wife had attracted him just as Blanche did, and what had happened? Everything sweet and snug for the first six months, and then a first quarrel because she caught him kissing a girl in his show—nothing but handcuffs and a prison cell ever satisfied *them*—and then more quarrels about where they should eat, and what kind of ties he ought to buy, and a dozen more trivial frictions. And money—two hundred a week for her expenses got to be like two dollars in her estimation. Then he had felt the gradual letting down of his desire for her—she had not become less attractive but less imperative and more a matter of pleasant convenience. He had returned to unfaithfulness, after drunken parties—how could any man help it?—and he'd certainly never forget the cheap, blah-blahing night when she had burst into a hotel room, with two private detectives, and found him with a woman. No more of that kind of joke for him.

These thoughts occurred to him irregularly as he talked to Blanche in the cab, and afterwards as they sat in a corner of The Golden Mill.

"You're a simp to work like a nigger all the time," he said. "What's it bring you, anyway? Three dimes and a crook in your pretty back, that's about all."

"It's easy for you to talk," she replied. "Tell me how I'd ever get along without working?"

"I'll keep you up any time you say," he responded, caressing her hand that rested on the table, "and don't think I'm spoofing you, either. I'll give you anything you want, and no strings tied to it. I mean it. Don't think I hand this spiel around ev'ry night! You've



had me going ever since I first saw you—you've got the class and I know it."

She looked at him meditatively—it would be necessary to "call him down" for this open proposal, but—just saying it to herself—why shouldn't she be supported by a man? How would she ever get a breathing spell otherwise?

"When I take money from any man I'm going to be married to him first," she replied, "and don't think I'm giving you any hints, either. 'F I wanted to be free and easy with men, I've had plenty of chances before this—plenty. I hate to work at something I don't care much for, sure, ev'ry girl does, but it's better than living with some fellow till he gets tired of you and then passing on to some one else. They'll never play baseball with yours truly 'f she can help it."

He was divided between admiration for her "spunk" and candor, and a suspicion that she might be testing him.

"I'll stop dealing from the bottom of the deck," he said, slowly. "I've known you for two years, now, Blanche, and it's time that we came to some understanding. This loving stuff's all apple-sauce to me—you always think you're nuts about a girl till she falls for you, and then you change your eyesight. I've had one bum marriage in my life, and I never was fond of castor-oil and carbolic acid on the same spoon. If you'll hook up with me, old girl, I'll treat you white, but I can't hand out any signed testimonials about how long it'll last, for you 'r me. What's the use of all this worrying about next week and next



year? It's like not sitting down to your meal, 'cause you don't know what you're going to have for dessert."

"Well, what's the proposition?" she asked, surprised at her own lack of indignation, and liking his unveiled attitude.

"I'll get you a swell apartment up in the West Seventies," he said, "and you can put up a bluff at studying something—music 'r acting 'r something like that—just a stall to keep your folks in the dark. I'll get a wealthy dame I know to take an interest in you, see? She'll be the blind. She's a good sport and she'll do anything for me. You'll be known as a *protégée* of hers, and your family'll never know I'm putting up the coin. Why, it's done ev'ry day in the year."

"So, I'm to be your miss-tress, like they say in the novels," Blanche answered, with a struggle of irritation and tired assent going on within her. "I suppose I ought to bawl you out for your nerve, but I won't take the trouble. I'd like to *really* study something, and get somewheres, but I'm not so sure I want to take it like that."

"What's the matter, don't you like my style?" he asked.

"You're not so bad 's far as you go," she replied, "but I don't happen to be in love with you."

"What of it?" he asked. "You know you like to be with me—that's what counts. Most of this love stuff's a lot of hokum, that's all. I never saw a couple in my life that stayed crazy about each other for more than two years, and that's a world's record.



If they stick to each other after that it's because they haven't got nerve enough to make a break, 'r for the sake of their kid, 'r a hundred other bum reasons. But they've lost the first, big kick ev'ry time—don't fool yourself."

"I don't know about that," she said slowly. "'F a girl finds a man that loves her for what she is—her ways of acting and talking—I don't see why they can't get along even 'f they do get tired of hugging and kissing all the time. They've got to have the same kind of minds, that's it."

"We-ell, how's my mi-ind diff'rent from yours?" he asked, amused and not quite comprehending (she sure had acquired a bunch of fancy ideas since his last meeting with her).

"It's this way, you don't like to read much, real good books, I mean," she replied, "and you never go to swell symf'ny concerts where they play beautiful music, and you don't care for paintings and statues and things like that. I never thought much of them myself, once upon a time, but I'm beginning to get wise to what I've been missing. I mean it. I've been going around for a long time with a fellow that likes those things, and I'm not as dumb's I used to be."

Campbell laughed inwardly—doggone if she hadn't become "highbrow" since their last time together! This was an interesting, though absurd, turn of affairs. She had probably been mixing with some writer or painter, who had stuffed her head with "a-artistic" poppycock, which she didn't understand herself, but which she valued because it was her idea of some-



thing grand and elegant. Girls like Blanche were often weathercocks—not satisfied with their own lack of talent and ready to be moved by any outburst of novel and impressive hot air that came along. Well, it would be easy to simulate a response to her new interests and captivate her in that way, unless the other man had already captured her.

“How do you know I don’t like those things?” he asked. “I’ve never talked much about them because I never knew they mattered to you. I thought you believed that this guy, Art, was a second cousin to artesian wells. How was I to know?”

She caught the presence of an insincerity in his glibness.

“’F they’d been first on your mind, you couldn’t have helped talking about them,” she replied. “Anyway, ’f I ever went to live with you, I’d never do it roundabout, like the thing you had in mind. I’m not much on lies and hiding things. When I leave home it’ll be a clean break, and anybody that doesn’t like it’ll have to mind his own business.”

“Well, I only wanted to make it easier for you,” he said. “If you don’t care whether your family gets sore, or not, it’s all the same to me.”

“Say, you talk as though I’d said yes to you,” she answered. “Don’t take so much for granted, Joe. I’ve listened to you like a good sport, instead of bawling you out, but I’m not going to rush off with you *this* week.”

“Now, now, I’m not trying to force myself on you,” he said, soothingly.



She *was* a wary one, and no mistake, but it looked as though he finally had her on the run, and it was all a question of whether he cared to exert a little more patience and persuasiveness in the matter. Of course, he'd continue the game—he had nothing to lose, and it would be a distinction to have her lovingly in his arms, and he really liked her defiance and her immunity from ordinary wiles and blandishments. She was somebody worth capturing—no doubt of that. A degree of cruelty also moved within his reactions. Just wait till he had her where he wanted her—he'd do a little bossing around himself then, and if she didn't like it . . .

When they departed from The Golden Mill, the whisky that she had had played tiddledywinks with her head, aided by the abrupt change from the heated cabaret to the cooler street air, and she felt an Oh-give-in-to-him-what's-the-dif' mood, and her thoughts grew mumbling and paralyzed. She swayed a bit on the sidewalk and he put an arm around her waist, to steady her.

"Say, Blanche, don't pass out on me," he said, anxiously. "We'll go over to my shack now, that's a good girlie. I won't eat you up, don't be afraid."

"I'll go anywheres . . . give my he-ead a rest . . . feels like a rock . . . that's funny . . . like a ro-ock," she answered, mistily.

He hailed a cab, and on the way over to his apartment, she leaned her head on his shoulder and passed into a semidrowsy state, while he caressed her with a careful audacity and smiled to himself. Well, well,



Blanche Palmer in the little old net at last—what a blessing liquor was, if you kept your own head.

When they reached his apartment—two ornate, untidy rooms with mahogany furniture, and signed theatrical photographs, and an air of cheaply ill-assorted luxury—he wanted her to rest upon one of the couches, but her head had grown a bit clearer by this time, and admonishings were once more faintly stirring within it. Where was she? Where? . . . In Campbell's apartment. . . . So, he'd gotten her there at last. Damn, why was everything trying to revolve around her? This wouldn't do at all. . . . She must . . . must . . . must get herself together. Tra, la, la, what on earth was the dif'? It would be nice to let the whole world go hang for one night, and feel a man's body against hers, and stop all of this fighting and objecting. Sweet, all right, sweet, but no . . . no . . . no . . . he'd be getting her too easy . . . and all he wanted was 'nother party with 'nother girl . . . she knew . . . and she just didn't love . . . oh, love, nothing . . . better to feel good and be yourself . . . but she didn't trust him and she wouldn't have him . . . just wouldn't have . . . yes, she would . . . no-o . . . she'd simply have to pull herself together.

She went to the bathroom and closed and locked the door behind her before he knew what was happening—he had been standing in a corner of the room and confidently slipping into his dressing-robe. Then she plunged her head into cold water, off and on, for the next half hour, and found a bottle of smelling-salts in his medicine cabinet and thrust it against her nos-



trils, and loosened her waist. She felt herself growing steadier, and the mists in her head changed to a swaying ache in which her thoughts regathered, and her emotions became sullen and self-contemptuous.

"You're some boob, you are, letting Joe Campbell dose you up with booze and get you to come to his place," she said to herself. "He almost put one over on you this time, you conceited dope. How much respect would he have for you if he got you this way? Say, don't make me laugh."

In spite of the sick giddiness that still remained within her, she became morosely determined to leave the apartment and return to her home. If he tried any rough stuff, she'd yell for aid, or break something over his head. But he wouldn't—he'd never risk losing her. He'd know darn well that if he tried any movie stunts she'd never see him again. Well, maybe she had misjudged him—maybe he was really in love with her and too ashamed to admit it. They always put up that I-don't-care-I've-got-a-hundred-others bluff, to impress a girl. Besides, men always wanted the same thing, and they shouldn't be blamed for that. It was natural.

During the half hour he had rapped repeatedly on the door and begged her to come out, and she had ignored his words. Now she opened the door and walked slowly into the room. He was mixing a highball, and he looked up with a placating smile.

"Well, feel any better now, Blanchie?" he asked, casually. "Sit down and rest it off."



"I'll say I do," she answered. "I'm going home, Joe."

He looked at her intently and saw that at least half of her drunkenness had disappeared. H'mm, this was a nice state of affairs. Sweet mamma, he'd rather go after a she-fox any day in preference to this girl! Well, he would have to renew his caresses and cajoleries—more carefully this time. He walked up to her and placed his arms around her.

"Listen, don't leave me flat now," he said. "I'm wild about you, dear, and I mean it. What's the use of stalling around all the time? Hell, life's short enough, and the next morning slaps you in the face just the same. I'd marry you in a second if I didn't know that marriage never turns out right. Let's be ourselves, Blanche dear—let's cut out this comedy stuff."

As he embraced her his words became more sincere than their original conception had been—somehow transformed by her smooth closeness and his grudging respect for the note of "class" within her.

She tried to thrust him away from her, with wobbly arms, and said: "You've got to let me go home, Joe, I'm not myself, I'm not. You wouldn't want me to give in to you just because I've drank too much—not if you love me like you say you do. 'F I ever come to you I don't want to be coaxed—I want to do it of my own accord, and be glad about it."

"I can't, you've got me up in the air," he answered, trying to embrace her again.

This time she repulsed him with more vigor.



"I'd like to see you stop me," she said. "'F you try it you'll wish you hadn't."

She walked to the couch and started to put on her hat and coat. His mind began to work swiftly, repressing his impulse to follow her and change it to a battle. The determination in her voice might not be real—he had subdued other girls by resorting to a mingled physical struggle and pleading at the last moment—but he had a hunch that it was genuine in her case. She was that rare kind of girl who had to be handled with extreme, inhuman care, and who had a fighting spirit within her and became sullenly stubborn when she thought that a man was trying to force himself upon her. If he controlled himself now, it might give him the halo of a "real gentleman" to her, and then afterwards she would come to him of her own accord, just as she had said. He walked up to her and held one of her hands, gently.

"What do you think I am—a gorilla 'r something?" he asked. "I'd never try to keep you here against your will, don't be silly. I thought you didn't mean it 'r else I'd never have acted this way. You've got the wrong slant on me, Blanche. I'll get a cab for you now and see you home."

She looked at him more softly and said: "Maybe I have, Joe, maybe. You can't be blamed 'f you want me, but you'll just have to wait till I come to you myself, 'f I ever do."

They descended to the street and he rode home with her. He kissed her lightly, as they stood in the



hallway of her building, and said: "When can I see you again, dear?"

"I'm too dizzy to think 'bout anything now," she replied. "Call me up real soon and we'll make a date."

She managed to reach her room with no greater heralding than a collision with a chair in the kitchen, and after she had undressed and turned out the light, she pitched herself upon the bed, as though she were violently greeting a tried and deliciously safe friend. For a while, fragments of thought eddied through the growing fog in her head. Hadn't she acted like an idiot—like one of those movie queens in the pictures, always struggling around with some man, like they were ashamed they had bodies? She was alone now—she'd had her way, and she was winding up with nothing, nothing except another day of hard word at the "parlor," with a heavy head to carry around. Oh, gee, where was the man with a big chest, and a handsome face—it wouldn't have to be pretty, like that of a cake-eater—and a complete understanding of all her longings, and a wonderful mind, and . . . her head grew blank and she fell asleep.

On the next morning she had a virulent headache, and felt thwarted and taciturn, and was quite certain that life was a fraud and that the future held nothing for her. The mood remained with varying intensities, during the next three days, but the resiliency of youth slowly drove it away, and on the third night, as she sat in her room, preparing for a "date" with Rosenberg, she felt quite skittish and intactly hopeful. After all, they hadn't been able to down *her* yet. She'd get



ahead in the world before she was through, and she'd find the man that she was looking for, and in the meantime, Mister Campbell, and Mister Munson, the stock-broker who had called for her in a limousine on the night before last—her birthday—and Mister Rosenberg, and all the rest of them, would have to jig to her tunes. She gave an idle thought to Munson. He was wealthy, and middle-aged, with a large wart on his broad nose, and his conversation . . . *his* money, and *his* friends, and what *he* would do for her. Yet, thousands of girls would simply have jumped at the chance to marry him. . . . All of these men were just makeshifts along the way, until she came across the man whom she could really love, and where was the selfishness involved?—her presence and her talk were worth just as much as theirs, and if they were not satisfied, there were no ropes tied to them. She never ran after *them*, did she?

Again, she berated herself for having as much as seriously considered Campbell's proposal to live with her and support her—in a couple of months at most he would have turned away from her and sought another girl, and then what would she have had? A sold-out feeling, and a wondering where to turn next, and the whole problem of her life still staring at her. And to think that she had been on the verge of giving in to him that night at his apartment! She would have to stay away from liquor for a while—it might turn her into a rank prostitute before she knew what was happening. A girl only needed one good push to throw everything to the winds, and she knew her weakness



and would have to be more on guard against it. When she met a man whom she loved, she'd be daring and ardent then and tell the world to go to the devil, without even worrying about how long it might last, and not merely because booze had made her feel jolly and helpless and overheated. At her next meeting with Campbell she intended to tell him that they could never be more than pleasant friends to each other.

As for her family, they were a more concrete bug-bear. She knew that Harry and her father would become pugnacious if she ever deserted her home without marrying a man of their choice, but in a pinch, what could they do except strike her, and if they dared . . .

She emerged from her room, and Mabel, who was sharing a newspaper with Harry, said: "I heard you come in las' night, Blan. 'F it wasn't five bells I'll eat your gray bonnet. I hope you didn't let Joe get too frisky, though I wouldn't blame you much if you did. Only he won't be liable to marry you 'less you hold him off—you know how men are!"

"I didn't see Joe last night, but don't worry, I wasn't born yesterday," Blanche answered.

"I guess you're gonna meet that Jew sissy uh yours," said Harry. "I'll give him a boxin' lesson 'f I run into him."

"That's all you ever have on your mind," Blanche retorted. "I don't see that all this fighting of yours has ever brought you much."

"That's all right, I'm not through yet," he responded, with an angry look. "You hate a guy that doesn't let off a lotta cheap gas and wriggle his hips."



As she left the building to meet Rosenberg at the corner drug store, two blocks away, she did not notice that Harry was following her. When she and Rosenberg had exchanged greetings and were about to cross the street, she heard her brother's voice cry: "Hey, wait a minnit!" and they turned around, and she asked: "What do you want, Harry?"

He ignored her and spoke to Rosenberg.

"Your name's Rosinburg, huh?" he asked. "I just wanna be sure."

"That's right," Rosenberg answered, scenting trouble and wondering what turn it would take.

"Well, you keep away from my sister, get me? You've been fillin' her head with garbage and turnin' her against her own people, you have, and I'm gonna put a stop to it. You're a Jew-kike besides, an' you better stick to your own kind and leave our girls alone, see? 'F you know what's good for you, you'll trot along, now."

Caution and wrath contended within Rosenberg. This man was a professional fighter and gangster, and could probably beat him easily in spite of the difference in their heights, but, by God, he wouldn't stand for that kind of insulting interference.

"You bet I'm a Jew, and I'm proud of it," he replied. "What gives you the idea that you can order me around? If Blanche wants to be with me, that's her business and not yours."

"Well, I'm gonna make it my business," Harry retorted, doubling his fists and stepping closer to Rosenberg.



Blanche, who had been stunned and then inarticulately angry at first, glared at Harry—of all the nerve, insulting her escort and handing out commands to *her*.

"Are you out of your mind, Harry?" she asked. "What do you mean by butting in like this? I'm not a baby and I'll do exactly as I please, and you might as well get that into your dumb head!"

Harry still ignored her and said to Rosenberg: "Are you gonna beat it 'r not?"

"You notice I'm still standing here, don't you?" Rosenberg asked, trembling a bit, but holding a lurid roar in his head, in spite of the sick pain in his breast.

He was in for it—it couldn't be helped.

Harry immediately punched Rosenberg in the jaw and stomach, in quick succession, and Rosenberg reeled back but recovered his balance and advanced with a snarl and wildly swinging arms. They fought around the sidewalk for the next half minute, while an increasing circle of men and women gathered silently about them. The spectators made no effort to interfere, but watched with that intent, hungrily curious impersonality that usually possesses city crowds in such a situation.

Blanche stood with a numb fear and a helpless anger heavy within her, as she nervously twisted her little white handkerchief and tried to look over the heads of the spectators. Was there anything in life except trouble, and browbeating, and every one trying to pull you a different way . . . and that vile brother of hers . . . she'd fix him for this audacity . . . poor Rosenberg, how she had unwittingly lured him into this mess . . .



he was more nervy that she had ever given him credit for . . . perhaps Harry was half killing him . . . poor, poor boy.

Rosenberg fought desperately, his courage reviving to an unnatural fervor beneath the repeated stinging blows, but Harry was far too swift and strong for him, and an uppercut to the jaw finally knocked Rosenberg to his knees. At this juncture some one yelled: "Jiggers, here comes a cop!" The ring of onlookers broke instantly, and some of them sped around the corner and walked swiftly down the side street, while others stood about indecisively. Harry promptly jumped into a nearby taxicab and was driven away—he had done his job and didn't mean to get arrested for it. Blanche hurried to Rosenberg and helped him to his feet, just as the policeman, with the proverbial lateness of his kind, strode up to them. Rosenberg's left eye was discolored and a rivulet of blood dropped from his swollen lips.

"What's all this rumpus about—where's the fellow that beat you up?" the policeman asked, loudly.

For a moment, Blanche was about to betray her brother, but she checked herself—what good would it do? Her hand tugged pleadingly at Rosenberg's arm.

"We were walking along when some enemy of his came up and hit him," she answered. "I don't know who the fellow was."

"Well, y'r escort knows, all right," the policeman said, turning to Rosenberg. "Who was he, come on, loosen up."



"I can't tell you 'cause I don't want to make any charges against him," Rosenberg answered, slowly. "He started it and I had to defend myself, that's all."

The officer turned disgustedly to the sprinkling of bystanders.

"Did any of you see what happened?" he demanded. There was a chorus of "noes" and "not me's."

"Yeh, you always take it in but you get blind afterwards," he said, angrily—he was a new policeman and brassily anxious to make arrests and acquire a record. "Go on, beat it now, don't stand around blocking up the corner. And you, girlie, you'd better take him in this drug store and have his face fixed up."

He waved his club as he dispersed the bystanders.

Blanche helped Rosenberg into the drug store, and the clerk applied a poultice to Rosenberg's eye and gave him some iodine for his mouth. Blanche felt an enormous pity for him—he was physically weak but he was not a coward, and she wished that she could love him, for he certainly deserved it. She had a sense of guilt at having caused him all this pain and trouble, and she became confused at the impossibility of making any amends to him. More kisses and hug-gings?—they would only lead him to an eventual disappointment. Only her love could make him happy, and that couldn't be manufactured, no matter how much you respected a man. Oh, darn, was there ever an answer to anything? . . . One thing was certain, though—for his own good she would have to stop seeing him. Otherwise, she would only continue to lure him into danger without offering him any reward.



On his own part, Rosenberg felt a determined resentment—if he was going to get his head knocked off for her sake, she would have to give him much more than friendship. There was no sense in fighting for a girl who didn't love you, or refused to surrender herself.

They sat for a moment on one of the drug store benches.

"You'd better go home now, Lou," she said. "We'll get a cab and I'll ride up with you. Your face must be hurting you terribly. Gee, I can't tell you how sorry I am that all this happened, Lou. Harry's nothing but a low-down cur, and if he ever dares to do anything like this again, I won't stay home another twenty-four hours. I've simply got to show them they can't walk all over me."

"Never mind about me, I'll be all right in a couple of days," he answered. "I've got something to say to you, Blanche, but we'll wait'll we're in the cab."

As they rode uptown, they were silent for a while, and then he said slowly: "We've got to have a show-down, Blanche. 'F I'm going to buck your whole family and that rotten gangster brother of yours, I want to be sure you'll marry me, first. I'd be a fool otherwise, you know that."

"I know," she answered, despondently, "and I don't blame you a bit. I like you lots, Lou, I've told you that enough times, and you've helped me so much, showing me how stupid I was, and . . . I feel blue about it. I don't love you—you give me a sort of peaceful feeling, and I like to hear you talk, and I don't mind



your ways . . . but that isn't love. . . . Oh, I've tried to love you, but it just wouldn't come. It just wouldn't. . . . I guess you'd better stop seeing me, Lou. I'd only bring you more trouble, and it wouldn't be fair to you."

"I'll see about it," he answered, dully. "I wish I'd never met you. You've never brought me anything but sadness, after all I did for you, and there's no use keeping it up forever."

"Lou, don't say that," she replied. "You know I've been honest with you. I never made any promises, never, and I've always told you just how I felt. I'm miserable about the whole thing as it is, and you can just bet I'll never forget you, Lou. I hung on to you all this time because I needed you, that's true, but I'd never have chased you if you hadn't wanted to be with me."

"Well, it's over, I guess," he said, "and talking won't help it any, now."

He felt a self-disparaging apathy. He had poured out his thoughts and ideas to this girl, and set her to thinking as she never had before, and this was his reward, eh? The whole world was just a selfish swamp. She had taken his gifts because they were needed revelations to her, and now she would save her love for some other man, who'd reverse the process and plunder her of all she had, and feast on the elastic dream of her body. No one ever loved you unless you walked all over them and made them worship your highhandedness. He had had a last lesson now, and henceforth he would have a cheeky, ap-



praising attitude toward every woman he ran across.

After they had traded their farewells—reluctant, empty monosyllables, in which each person was trying to say something more and finding himself unable—Blanche boarded a Ninth Avenue elevated train and rode home, with all of her thoughts and emotions uncertain and sluggish. What was the use of living?—you wound up by hurting the other person, or else he injured you, with neither of you meaning to do it, and then you separated, and accused yourself of selfishness without being able to remedy the matter. But this brother of hers—wait till she got hold of him! She'd give him the worst tongue-lashing of his life, and warn him never to interfere in her affairs again. What did he think she was—a doormat? Brother or no brother, he was a cruel, stupid man, and things would have to come to an issue between them. She was self-supporting and of age, and if her family persisted in treating her as though she were a slave, she would have to leave their roof.

As she walked into the living-room of her home, she found her mother seated beside the table, darning socks and munching at an apple. She threw her hat and coat upon the seamed, leatherine couch, while her mother asked: "How come you're back so soon, Blanie, dear? Ten o'clock, and *you* walkin' in! I think the world's comin' right to an end, I do that. D'you have a fight with the man you was with? Tell your ma what happened now."

"Has Harry been back?" Blanche asked.

"No, he never gets back till early mornin', and so



does Mabel, an' Phil, an' your pa. None of you ever stays to home to keep *me* comp'ny."

"I know you get lonely, ma," Blanche answered, stroking her mother's hair for a moment and trying to feel much more concerned than she was. "Didn't Mrs. O'Rourke, or Katie, come down to-night?"

"They did, sure enough, but it's not like havin' your own fam'ly with you," her mother replied.

Blanche looked at her mother, reflectively. Poor ma, she *was* kind of stupid, but maybe she had been more intelligent in her younger days and had had it slowly knocked out of her. She didn't get much out of life, that was a fact, and she worked hard all the time, and she never harmed anybody. Poor ma. . . . Then Blanche returned to anger at the thought of Harry.

"Just wait'll I see Harry," she cried. "I'll tell him a thing or two, I will!"

"What's Harry been doin', now?" her mother asked.

"He followed me to-night till I met Lou Rosenberg, and then he walked up and told Lou to keep away from me, and picked a fight with him. Of course he beat Lou up—he knows all the tricks, and Rosenberg doesn't. Then a cop came along, and Mister Harry Palmer ran into a cab, like the coward he is! Believe me, I'm going to show all of you, once and for all, that you can't boss me around, and if you keep it up I'll leave home in a jiffy."

"I jes' know Harry'll get into jail yet, with all this scrappin' uh his," her mother said, alarmedly. "Maybe this Mister Rosinburg will have to go to the hospital,



an' then they'll come after Harry. Did he hurt him awful bad?"

"No, he just gave him a black eye and cut his mouth, but that was bad enough," Blanche answered. "The whole thing happened so quick I couldn't do anything about it, and besides, I never dreamt Harry would dare to pull a stunt like that. I'm so angry I could punch him if he was here!"

"That's no way to be talkin' about your own brother," Mrs. Palmer said. "It's I that don't think he did right, I don't, but still, he only meant it f'r your own good. You shouldn't be goin' around with Jews, you shouldn't, and this fella Rosinburg, he's been makin' you act so silly-like, with all them books that nobody c'n make head 'r tail of. You're gettin' to be 'n old girl now, Blanie, you are, and it's time you were thinkin' of marryin' a good man to keep you in comfort."

"Why isn't a Jew as good as anybody else?" Blanche asked. "I don't love Rosenberg, but believe me, 'f I did, none of you could keep *me* away from him. I'm going to stop seeing him' cause I don't want him to get into trouble all for nothing, but I won't stand for any more orders—I'm a free person, and I make my own living, and 'f I think I'm doing right, that's all I care about."

"Blanie, you're talkin' somethin' terribul," her mother answered, sadly aghast. "You oughta have more respect for your pa 'n' ma, you ought. We raised you up from a kid, an' we give you everythin' we could, an' we only want to see you do the right thing. You've



got to settle down and have a fine, good-looking, Christian fellow, who's earnin' good wages. Course, you must be lovin' him first—I'd never want you to marry no one you didn't care for, I wouldn't, but that's not everythin' either. I'd like to see you livin' like a lady, I would, an' havin' a fine home, 'n' servants, 'n' the best uh everythin'."

"Marry, marry, that's all you ever think about," Blanche replied. "You mean well, ma, but you can just see so far and no farther. What did you ever get out of marrying, I'd like to know? Nothing but work, and trouble, and worrying around."

"That's why I want to see you do better, that's why," her mother responded. "It's I that knows how foolish I was, I know it, and I don't want you to go through all the strugglin' I've had. 'F you marry a man like Mister Campbell, now, you'll live in a swell apartment an' you'll have the things you want."

"You don't know what I want, ma," Blanche said, sadly. "I want to be somebody, and find out what's the reason for things, and use my head for something besides a hat-rack. Any girl can marry and let a man use her—there's no trick in that. I'm tired of being just like other people—I want to act, 'r write, 'r paint, and make a name for myself. You think a woman shouldn't do anything except have children and be as comfortable as she can. You can't understand what I'm looking for, ma."

"It's I that can't, it's all foolishness to me," her mother replied, perplexedly. "I don't see why a woman should be anythin' 'cept a good wife 'n' a good mother,



'f she finds a man that'll treat her right 'n' provide f'r her. This bein' somebody you're always talkin' about, I don't see how it'll ever make you happy, I don't. It's your heart that counts most, an' nothin' else. You never talked like this 'fore you met that Rosinburg. I'm glad you're not goin' to meet him again."

"We're both just wasting our words—let's cut it out," Blanche said, depressedly, as she walked into her room.

Her mother looked after her with a sorrowful, uncomprehending expression. What was her poor daughter coming to, with all this unlady-like nonsense, and all this refusing to listen to the counsel of her family, who only wanted her to have a happy and respected future. Well, maybe she'd change, now that she wasn't seeing that Jew-fellow any more. Jews were human beings, but they were tricky and queer and always out after the money, and they had no right to be picking on Gentile girls. . . . Of course, if Blanche didn't change, then her pa and Harry would have to take hold of her. She mustn't be allowed to go to the dogs and ruin herself and her chances. While she, the mother, would never let the menfolks abuse her daughter or lay their hands on her, she still felt that they would have to act sternly to bring Blanche to her senses. It couldn't be helped as long as Blanche refused to behave.

When Blanche rose on the following morning, Harry was still asleep, and they did not collide until she returned from work that night. The family were seated around the supper-table, and Mabel looked at Blanche,



with curiosity and reproach interwoven, while her father squinted questioningly at her, and Philip squirmed in his chair, like some one waiting for a dynamite detonation. He hated family quarrels—you couldn't agree with both sides and yet you were always expected to. He felt that the others were "too hard" on Blanche, and he hoped that she would give them a piece of her mind.

Harry had a nonchalant mien which placated the fear within him which he did not quite admit to himself—there was something about Blanche that he couldn't fathom, and no matter how much he sought to squelch this alien foe, with word and action, it never died—a derided but still-threatening specter.

Blanche was silent until she had seated herself at the table, and then she burst forth.

"Harry, I'm going to tell you something—'f you ever beat up any one I'm with again, and try to order me around, I'll break something over your head! Just try it once more and see what happens!"

"I'll do that little thing," Harry answered. "The last person I was afraid of, he died ten years ago."

"That's just how I feel," Blanche replied. "'F I'm not left alone from now on, I'm going on the war-path."

"Bla-anie, you mustn't talk that way, an' you, too, Harry," Mrs. Palmer said. "I never, never heard of a brother an' sister carryin' on like this! I do think Blanche oughta listen more to what we tell her, I do, but breakin' things over y'r heads, why I never heard the like of it. You won't help things that way."

"See here, Blanche, we've got to lay down the law



to you," her father said. "No more goin' around with Jews, and no more talkin' back all the time. I'm your father an' I'm gonna put my foot down. You're not a bad kid, I don't say that, but you're too fresh, an' you think you know it all. You better stop readin' them phony books and pay attention to yourself, an' act like a reg'lar girl."

"Suppose I leave home, what'll you do about it?" Blanche asked.

"I can't stop you from doin' that, but 'f you do, don't think you can come back here again—not 'less you're married, anyway," her father replied. "We'll all be through with you then, an' you'll be no daughter uh mine."

"I don't know what's gotten into you, Blanche," Mabel said. "You don't seem to have any sense nowadays."

"Of course you don't," answered Blanche. "All you care about is having a good time, and working men for all they're worth, and hunting around for a fellow with money who'll marry you. I want to do something that counts, and I want to look into things. That's all a mystery to you."

"Is that so-o?" Mabel asked, bristling up. "I've got just as good a head as you have, even 'f I don't go around with a chip on my shoulder, like you do, and tell people I'm better than they are. I'm gonna be a rich lady and be up in the world 'fore I'm through with the game, but you'll wind up with nothing but that hot air you're always spouting."

"Well, I think you're all too rough on Blanche,"



Philip said. "Maybe she ought to marry and settle down, but it's her look-out. 'F she wants to make a name for herself, and study something, I don't see anything so awful about it."

"You're the best one in this fam'ly, Phil," said Blanche, with a grateful look. "You're not so wise, but you do believe in letting people alone."

"Yes, you an' him are twins, all right," Harry interposed, "but he knows enough to keep quiet most of the time, and you don't."

"Now, Harry, what did I ever do against you?" Philip asked.

"Not a thing, but you wouldn't side with Blanche all the time 'f you wasn't like she is," Harry answered.

The argument went on, with Blanche subsiding to a hopeless silence, but as the meal ended, it became more indifferent. Their appeased appetites brought the others a brief, sluggish contentment, and they felt sure that it was all just a "lot of jawing," and that Blanche would never really revolt—she was a Palmer, after all.

The next week passed quietly enough, with Blanche and Harry casting disdainful looks at each other but rarely speaking, and the rest of the family persuaded that it might be better to leave Blanche alone as long as she failed to do anything definitely objectionable. Then, one evening, just after Blanche had returned from work, a loud rapping sounded on the front door, and after her mother had responded, Blanche heard a gruff voice asking: "Is this where Mabel Palmer lives, huh?" When her mother had answered yes, the gruff voice continued: "Well, we're detectives from



the Sixth Precinct, and we want to have a talk with you people."

"Oh, Lord, what's the matter—what's happened to Mabel?" Mrs. Palmer asked, agitatedly, as she entered the living-room, with the two detectives walking behind her.

They were tall, burly men, in dark, ill-fitting suits, slouch hats of brown, and heavy, black shoes, and one of them had a florid, impassive face, while the other was tanned and more openly inquiring. They sat down in chairs and looked the Palmers over. Harry and his father sought to appear calm and careless but could not repress an involuntary nervousness—there were several shady spots in their lives that shrank from the impending searchlight, but these bulls wouldn't be acting this way if they really *knew* anything—while Philip looked warmly innocent—they didn't have anything on *him*—and Mrs. Palmer wrung her hands and told herself that all of her dire prophecies had been fulfilled. Blanche was curious but undisturbed—little Mabel Know-Everything had gotten into trouble at last, but what was it?

"Your girl's locked up at Arlington Market," the florid detective said. "You know why, don'tcha?"

"My poor little Mabel, what's happened to her?" Mrs. Palmer asked. "I don't know a thing that she's done, I swear I don't!"

"That's straight, we don't know what it's all about," Harry said, and his father eagerly corroborated him.

"Well, we nabbed her this afternoon on Broadway," the other detective replied. "She's been mixing up



with a lotta bond-thieves, and we think she's one of their go-betweens. She's been seen all the time with the brains uh the gang, hanging around cabarets with him. We got him yesterday, and we'll scoop in the rest of them before to-morrow. If you people don't know anything about this, it's mighty funny you let your daughter associate with a gang like that."

"Yeh, why do you let her run loose all the time?" the florid detective asked.

"I've always told her not to be so wild, I've always," answered Mrs. Palmer, "but she never listened to me. She's really a good girl off'cer, she didn't mean any harm, but she likes to have men payin' attentions to her. I know she hasn't done anything wrong, I know it. She prob'bly thought those men was honest, that's it, an' she b'lieved all the lies they told her."

"That's what they all say," the other detective replied, gruffly.

"You're wrong, Mabe's a straight kid," Mr. Palmer said. "She got into bum comp'ny an' didn't know it, that must be it."

"That's what *you* say, but we got a diff'rent idea," the florid detective retorted. "Sure, you'd take up for her, that's an old trick."

"I cert'nly will," the father answered, spiritedly. "'F you've got any evidence against her, all right, but I'll have to hear it first 'fore I b'lieve it. I'll take up for my own daughter any time, any time."

"Sure, I understand," the other detective said, more amiably. "All we know's that she went around with that gang, hitting up the night clubs, but we haven't



connected her with anything yet. It looks bad for her, that's all."

"We'll put her through a grilling to-night and find out more about it"—the florid detective suddenly turned to Blanche. "What d'you do for a living?"

"I work at Madame Jaurette's Beauty Parlor, on Fifth Avenue near Twenty-sixth," Blanche responded, coolly. "Come down there some day and I'll curl your blond locks for you. They need it."

The detective grinned and replied: "We'll look you up, don't worry."

"And you, what's your trade?" he asked her father.

"I don't do much now 'cause my leg's on the bum," Mr. Palmer replied. "I used to be a bartender in the old days when we had a little freedom in this town."

"Well, you'd better stop loafing around and get a job," the detective advised.

"I always work when I'm able to," said Mr. Palmer. "I used to manage my boy here, Harry, Battling Murphy—maybe you've seen him scrap somewheres. He got a raw deal an' they barred him from the ring, but he'll be back there 'fore long, don't worry."

The florid detective looked closely at Harry and then said: "Damned if it isn't Bat' Murphy himself! I won some dough on you once when you was fighting Kid Morley down at the Terrace. Why didn't you tell us who you was?"

"You was askin' my folks questions an' I didn't wanna butt in," Harry replied as he shook hands, warmly, with the detective.

"I hear you been cutting up with a bad gang lately,



Bat'," the other detective interposed, in a tone of friendly reproof. "Better cut it out and get back into condition again. We wouldn't like to pull you in, y'know."

"You c'n lay a bet I will," Harry replied. "I'm no has-been yet, I'm tellin' you I knocked a coupla fellas out at the gym the other day. . . . An' now about this poor kid sister uh mine. She isn't a bad one, but you know how fellas c'n fill a girl up with a lotta phony gab. I don't think she knew a damn thing about what was goin' on."

"You can bail her out, all right, when we're through putting the question to her," the other detective said. "Know any one to go to?"

"Know any one, I'll say we do," Harry answered. "Why, Bill O'Brien, the Wigwam chief in this district's a good friend uh the old man, an' me too. He'll put up the coin in a second."

"All right, come down to Arlington Market court to-morrow morning, ten sharp, when she's arraigned, and we'll see what we can do," the detective said, with respect in his voice, as both of them rose. "And by the way, who's this man in the corner?"

"He's my brother Phil, works in a drug store a coupla blocks away," Harry answered.

"A-all right, I guess you're all straight enough," the detective replied, genially. "Only, if your kid sister gets out of this, you better keep a strict tab on her. She's a flighty one and no mistake."

"It's sure I am that this'll teach poor Mabel a lesson," Mrs. Palmer said, with a sad eagerness. "An' to



think she's sittin' in a cell right now. It's terribul, it is!"

"We-ell, don't take it to heart, she may be out soon," the other detective answered.

The detectives departed, and after Harry had cautiously opened the door and assured himself that they had gone, he came back and said: "We've gotta get poor Mabe outa this. I'm gonna run over to Tenth Avenue now an see 'f I c'n get ahold of O'Brien."

"I wonder whether they've got the goods on her," his father said. "I can't think a wise girl like Mabel would lay herself open to five years in the pen. It don't seem reas'nable. She musta had the wool pulled over her eyes."

"It's li'ble to happen to any girl," Harry answered. "When a girl goes out with a guy, how's she to know whether he's a crook 'r not? Besides, if Mabel was in on it she'd have been flashin' a roll around here, and if she's got one she's sure been hidin' it well, I'll say."

"Well, I do think she oughta be more careful 'bout who she goes with," Mrs. Palmer said. "I swear, between Mabel and Blanche, I'm goin' right to my grave, I am."

"Aw, don't take on so, Kate," her husband answered. "Mabel's not like Blanche anyway—she don't put on the dog an' tell her folks they don't know nothin'. She jus' wants to have a good time an' land a good man f'r herself, and she'll get over this mess all right. She made a mistake in the crowd she went with—they prob'bly told her they was rich business men."



"I suppose I'll have to get arrested before any of you'll think I know something," Blanche broke in, disgustedly. "I'm sorry Mabel got into this fix, but if you try to play men for their money, you've got to expect that they'll turn the tables on you, the first chance they get."

"G'wan, you're jes' jealous uh her," Harry said. "You'd do the same thing 'f you had nerve enough."

"Now, now, this is no time f'r scrappin'," his father interposed. "We've got to hustle around to O'Brien an' see what he c'n do f'r us."

The two Palmers departed, and Blanche and Philip tried to soothe the mother, who had begun to weep and rock in her chair. Blanche felt a dab of malice toward her sister—Mabel was so dreamless, and never tried to understand Blanche's hopes and desires, and was always scoffing and sneering—but it was swallowed up by a sense of enforced compassion. Perhaps Mabel was just a misguided girl whose head had been turned by the flatteries of men, and perhaps she would wake up now and begin to think, and question herself and her life, to a small degree at any rate. In addition, Blanche was relieved at this turn in events, since it might distract the attention of her family and make them drop for a time their insistence upon marriage, and their naggings about Campbell, and their jeers at the books that she read. She went to bed early that night, and reclined awake for a long time, spinning her hopes from the dark texture of the room. After all, why did she waste so much time in arguing with her family? They would never understand her in a mil-



lion years, and they meant well in spite of all of their meanness, but she had simply passed beyond them. They wanted her to be like them, and share their ideas of happiness and propriety, and they used cruel methods and threats without knowing how cruel they were because they felt that the end could apologize for the means. It was all inevitable, and the best thing that she could do would be quietly to pack her belongings some day and move out to some rooming-house uptown before they knew what was happening. Then let them rave all they wanted—what could they do?

Besides, her leaving would convince them that she "meant business," and most of their bullying was probably due to the fact that they still thought that they could force her to obey them. When she was finally living in a place of her own, she'd go to some art or dramatic school at night—maybe she could learn to draw after all, since she had been very clever with sketches when she was a child at school, and still poked around with a pencil now and then. Or again, why couldn't she be able to act on the stage, if she were only taught how to handle her voice and her limbs. These famous actresses, they hadn't been perfect and accomplished in their cradles, and if she studied English and learned how to speak more correctly, she might have as good a chance as they had had. Nothing ever came to you unless you had a desperate faith in yourself. She would have to work long and hard at these things, she knew that, but she worked hard every day as it was, without deriving any satisfaction from it.



An image of Rosenberg slipped back to her. Poor boy, wonder what he was doing now? She owed a great deal to him, and the only payment that she had given had been to jilt him. Was it always as one-sided as this between men and women—always a kind of slave-and-master affair, with one person taking everything and the other person hanging on because he couldn't think of any one else and was grateful for the scraps that were thrown to him? She hadn't meant to hurt this boy—he had wanted feelings that were impossible to her, and her body had often endured his hands out of pity, and her only reason for guilt was that she had kept on seeing him. But she had needed, oh, she had needed all of the spurrings-on, and answers, and thoughts, and beliefs in her, which he had poured out—yes, it had been selfishness on her part, but she was beginning to think that people could never avoid being selfish to each other in some respect, even though they hid it behind all kinds of other names and assertions. They *could* make it aboveboard, though, by confessing the unevenness of their relations, and by not demanding anything that each person was not compelled to give of his own accord. The ideal, of course, would be a man and a woman who selfishly craved all of each other, for deeply permanent reasons, in which case each one would become a happy plunderer—did such a thing ever quite come off? . . . Her thoughts trailed out into sleep.

On the next morning at the Beauty Parlor, Blanche was distracted, and a little uneasy about her sister—after all, the poor kid was just conceited and flighty,



with no real harm in her—and when Philip came in at noon and told her that Mabel had been released, for lack of evidence, Blanche was glad that the matter had blown over. When Blanche returned from her work that night, Mabel was seated in the one arm-chair in the apartment, with the rest of the family grouped admiringly around her. Now that it was all over, they regarded her as something of a heroine—one who had tussled with their never-recognized but potent enemy, the law, and emerged scot-free—and although they qualified this attitude with warnings and chidings, it dominated them, nevertheless. The mother remained an exception—she hoped that her daughter would act more soberly now, and leave her nightly dissipations, and mingle with more honest men.

“Gee, I’m glad you’re out,” Blanche said, after kissing her sister. “Did they treat you rough after they arrested you?”

“They wasn’t so bad,” Mabel answered. “They put me through a coupla third degrees, first when they brought me in, and then another one ’bout nine in the ev’ning, tryin’ to trip me up, y’know. They said they knew I was a prostitute, jes’ to get my goat, and I started to cry and said it was a darn lie—I jes’ couldn’t help it.”

“They pull that off on ev’ry girl,” Harry said. “’F she is one, then she’ll own up cause she thinks they know all about it—that’s the game.”

“How’d you happen to get in with a crowd like that?” Blanche asked.

“I didn’t know what they was,” Mabel replied,



aggrievedly. "Gee whiz, you can't follow a fella around an' see what he's doin', can you? This Bob Sullivan, now, he told me he was a book-maker at the races, an ev'rybody I knew seemed to think he was. Then he had a friend, Jack Misner, said he was a jockey—a little runt of a guy. Bob swore all the time he was gone on me. He's a nice fella at that, he is, an' I'm darn sorry they got him."

"Well, you shouldn't be," her mother said. "When any one's dishonest they oughta get punished for it, they ought. This world would be a fine world, it would, 'f ev'rybody went round and robbed ev'rybody else. An' what's more, I do hope you'll stay home more now, Mabel dear, an' keep outa trouble, I do."

"Aw, pipe down, Kate," her husband broke in. "She's gotta size up her men better fr'm now on, sure, but you can't expect her to sit around here all night. She c'n have all the fun she wants, I don't mind, long as she looks them over more careful an' don't swallow all their gab."

"It's jes' no use f'r me to say anythin'," Mrs. Palmer answered, dolefully. "None uh you ever pays any attention to Kate Palmer till it's too late, and then it's ma do this f'r me, an' ma do that."

"I'll watch out more, ma, I will," Mabel said. "When I meet a fella with a big wad I'm gonna find out how he makes it 'fore I let him take me out. A girl's gotta protect herself, that's a fact."

"It wouldn't hurt you to go out with a few men that work for a living—just for a change," Philip said.



"Maybe they won't take you to swell joints, maybe not, but they'll get you into less trouble all right."

"Don't wish any uh Blanche's kind on me," Mabel retorted. "When I want to go to a sixty-cent movie-house, 'r sit down on a bench in the park, I'll have my head tested to see 'f I'm all there."

Her little, straight nose turned up, and her loosely small lips drew together to a tight complacency. Her plump face was more drawn, and hollows were under her eyes, and a trace of fright still lingered in the black eyes, but the expression on her face was one of rebuked but still ruling impudence. She told herself that she had been stung once by men—an incredible incident—and would henceforth set out to revenge herself upon them. It was all just a fight to see which side would get the best of the other, and she wouldn't be caught napping twice. Her goal was to marry a man with money and good looks, and she wouldn't allow anything to deter her. Beneath these determinations, sentimentalities and fears, aroused by the shock of her arrest, told her that she was flirting too closely with danger, and that it might be better to look for a stalwart youth with a laughable "line" and a movie-hero face—she was tired, after all, of letting homely, slow-tongued fellows kiss and hug her because they spent money to give her the gay nights that were due to every girl, and then again, she really ought to consider her poor ma, who was always fretting about her. Aw, well, she *would* slow down just a little and stay home once in a while, and select her escorts with more of an eye to their safety and their physical attraction,



and with money alone no longer all-supreme, but she would never subside to a back-number—not she. Plenty of girls ended by catching rich young men with a dash to them, and she could do the same thing if she kept a level head.

As Blanche listened to her sister, a disapproving sadness welled up within her—same old Mabel, not a hairbreadth changed. People seemed to be born in one way and to stick to it for the rest of their lives. She herself had never been quite like Mabel, even when she, Blanche, had been much more stupid than she might be now. She had always hunted for something without knowing what it was, and had always been “easier,” and more unhappy, and more concerned with the “inside” of herself.

“Men and men, that’s all you’ve got on your mind,” she said to her sister, softly. “’F you were ever wrecked now on some island, like I read about once, with nothing but another girl to keep you company, I think you’d go mad. You wouldn’t know what to do with yourself.”

“I’d like to know who would,” Mabel answered. “Why, even you, smarty, you’ve got to step out with diff’rent fellas, I notice. I suppose I’ll have to excuse myself f’r being a woman, next thing I know.”

“That’s your only excuse,” Blanche said, as she turned away.

“Well, it’s a good enough one to suit me,” Mabel retorted, irascibly.

Blanche walked into her room without replying. What was the use of speaking to people when your



words went into one of their ears and instantly flew out of the other? Her future course of action had been determined. If her family ceased to bother her, she would continue to live with them, and go to some school at least five nights out of each week and reserve the other two for sessions with men and for relaxation. She wouldn't live like a nun, that was ridiculous, but she would make a serious effort to master some profession or form of expression that would be much higher and more inwardly satisfying than doing the same thing with her hands every day. And if her family continued to be meddlesome and dictating, she would move out some morning when the menfolk were away.

During the next two days her existence was undisturbed. The Palmers had been somewhat chastened by Mabel's arrest, and they had to admit that, in spite of the disagreeable mystery that Blanche had become, she *did* manage to keep herself out of difficulties. Their confidence in Mabel was not as great as it had been, and it affected to a moderate degree their temporary reactions toward Blanche.

On the third afternoon, Campbell telephoned Blanche at the Beauty Parlor and arranged to meet her that night. She wanted to tell him that he would have to remain content with her friendship and that otherwise she could not see him again, and that her promise to "think over" his offer of an apartment and a shrouded alliance had been caused merely by her desperation in the face of barriers that withheld her from her desires. She intended to tell him frankly that she had



resolved to permit him no greater physical liberties than a kiss now and then, and that she had made up her mind to reserve herself for the advent of an actual love. If he still wanted to take her out under those conditions, she'd be willing to see him once a week at most—he *was* a jolly sedative in his way—but he would have to show her that he had a serious mind and a sincere love for her before she would reconsider his pleas. After all, there was such a thing as slowly falling in love with a man, if he made you entirely reverse your previous image of him. Campbell would never closely approach her ideals, she knew that, but perhaps he might make a respectable progress toward it, in which case she might accept him as the best real prospect possible to her.

She dressed to meet him that night, with a division of cautious and sanguinely impertinent feelings seething within her. As they were walking down Ninth Avenue, he looked admiringly at her round white felt hat, trimmed with a zigzag dash of black velvet, and her plain yellow pongee dress that had an air of subdued sprightliness about it, and her long, black coat with squirrel fur at the bottom. These girls, working for twenty-five a week, or thirty at most, how on earth did they manage to doll up like Peggy Hopkins Joyce? Funny too, they never seemed to retain this penny-transforming ability after they were married!

"You look like a million bucks, to-night," he said, "I'd give a week's salary to know how you do it."

"Well, listen to Mister Innocent—never heard about



instalment plans, and bargain hunting, and getting things cheap 'cause you know the head buyer."

"Oh, even at that it's the world's eighth wonder to me," he replied. "I'm afraid to take you any place to-night. Everybody I know'll be trying to horn in on us."

"Why, I thought competition was your middle name," she said, brightly.

"No, it's only an alias—too much of it's as bad as too little," he answered. "Anyway, don't you get tired of scrimping and putting yourself out for clothes all the time?"

"What 'f I do?" she asked.

"Well, you know what I told you time before last," he said. "I'll pay all the bills and like it, any time you're ready. You said you were going to think it over—remember?"

"Yes, I do," she replied, soberly. "I'll talk to you about it later on to-night. And don't call a cab, Joe. Let's walk a few blocks, for a change. You always act like you hated to use your legs."

"I use 'em enough behind the lights to make up for all the riding I do," he answered, amused.

They strolled over to Broadway, and were silent most of the time, save for commenting on some of the people striding past them. When they reached the corner of Broadway and one of the Forties, he said: "Say, Blanche, a friend of mine, Jack Donovan, 's pulling a party to-night in his place. There'll be two 'r three chorines from the Passing Gaieties show, and a couple of respectable crooks—um, I mean boot-



leggers—that kind of thing. I said I'd be up about eleven-thirty but I won't go if you don't want to. We could drop in at The Golden Mill and kill time until then."

"Sure I'll come, 'f it's not going to be too wild," she replied. "I never was much on those parties where they try to pass you around like you was a dish of ice cream."

"Strictly pairs at Jack's place, and the same pair lasts through the night," he said. "Stick to the woman you're with 'r take the elevator down—that's the rule."

"'F there's too much booze flowing, that elevator-boy sure must be kept busy," she retorted, with a laugh.

"Oh, we run it ourselves—we're accommodating," he said, with a grin.

After they were seated at a table in The Golden Mill and had finished half of their highballs, she said: "Joe, I'm going to talk serious to you. I was just in a silly mood when I said last time I'd think about living with you. It wouldn't work out—it never does unless two people really love each other. 'F I ever fall hard in love with you, Joe, I'll do it in a minute. I'm not afraid, but I don't love you now. Besides, it's not just a question of some man, with me. I've made up my mind to try and be an artist or an actress—don't laugh now—and I wonder whether you could help me any."

He listened to her with chagrin and amusement—going after her was like wading for eels, and she certainly had this "higher aspiration" bug with a ven-



geance. These girls now, they were amenable enough when their only desires were a good time, fine clothes, and a man who wouldn't give them the shivers, but the moment they started to get this "self-expression," I-want-to-be-different craze, boy, what a tough proposition they became. Still, even that could be turned to your advantage if you "yessed" it along and insinuated that you alone could cause it to succeed. In addition, in spite of his cynical feelings, he could not quite down his respect for her determination to struggle out of her present life. She was no ordinary girl, that was certain, and in a way she was a marvel, in view of the family that she came from and the half-dirty, low-down flat in which she'd been raised. She probably had no acting ability—they hardly ever did—but you could never be sure about *her*; she was little Miss Surprise herself. Well, if he could only land her first, he'd be willing to help her along—why not?

He looked at her eager face, that was not quite pretty but boldly attractive and well-spaced, and the almost full drop of her bosom rising and falling more quickly as she talked, and the restrained sturdiness of her lips. Beyond a doubt, he'd give his right hand to have her, and yet he couldn't absolutely tell himself why.

"Well, well, Blanchie's gone and got stage-struck," he answered, lightly. "You know I'll do anything for you, you know that, but I don't want to see you wasting your time. This acting game's a long, hard proposition—some get in overnight but they're damn few in number. I know girls who've been in it for years, and



all they've got is a diamond ring in pawn and a favorite chair at the booking agencies. A girl's got to have more than ambition to make any one notice her on Broadway, nowadays. How d'you know you're fit to be an actornine?"

"I don't, but I want a try-out just the same," she replied. "How'll I ever know what I'm cut out for unless I go to it and see what I can do? 'F I turn out to be a frost as 'n actress, I'll take up drawing 'r something else. There must be something I can do as good as other people, besides working like a nigger every day."

"Sure there must," he said, soothingly. "I'm with you all the time—I like to see a girl who can think of something else besides putting on the glad rags and lifting the glasses. You've got the stuff in you, and it's never had a chance to come out, and I'm the one man you know who can help you in the acting line, don't forget that. I'll get you a try-out for some play—just a little part, y'know, where you walk across the stage 'n' say 'Madame, will you have the tea served now, or next Monday?' I'll make them take you, too."

"Will you?" she asked, eagerly. "Say, you're a brick, Joe!"

"Not my head, anyways," he said, smiling. "D'you know, I'm really gone about you. It took two years to turn the trick—little Joe hates to be caught, he does—but 'f I'm not in love with you now, it's so close, I can feel the breath on my neck. Why don't you hook up with me and let me have you meet the right people and push you along? You're not in love with



me now, but you like me pretty well at that, don't you?"

"I do," she answered, "but I want to find out first whether you really mean all of this, and whether you're really int'ested in the same things I am. You mustn't be angry at this. It's a serious thing to me, and I want to be sure. Besides, 'f you do care for me, why can't you help me even 'f we *are* just friends?"

"Of course I will," he responded, with an easy heartiness. "It's not like a business transaction to me."

If she became more and more dependent upon his assistance, she couldn't hold out forever. . . . They departed from the cabaret, after another highball, and went to the apartment of his friend, Jack Donovan. Donovan was a sturdy man of forty, whose five-foot-eleven were supported by flat feet and buttressed by the girth of a paunch. His head was one-quarter bald and his black hair was wetly combed down, and the oval of his face, rising from an almost double chin, was a morbid calculation, as though he were weary of his stage-laughs and smiles, and wondering what in the devil was so funny about life, anyway, except that people liked to pay money to be joshed into believing that it was. He did a monologue in vaudeville—one of those acts in which a portly "Senator Callahan," in a frock coat and a high hat, cracks jokes about the events and foibles and personages of the day, with many a crudely ironical fling at grafting officials and high prices and prohibition, with lower puns and slap-stick harangues against the prevailing



immodesty of feminine attire— “They’d wear ’em two feet above the knees if they weren’t afraid it would completely discourage a guy.” He greeted Joe with an off-hand amiability, and looked at Blanche, after the introduction, with a side-long intentness. Joe knew how to pick ’em, all right—she wasn’t a doll-baby but she had class to her.

The two front parlors of the apartment had an ebony baby-grand piano, and Louis Sixteenth furniture picked up at auctions and standing beside the squat, varnished products of Grand Rapids—an oak sideboard with large, glass knobs and an oak settee. Some bottles and other accessories were on the sideboard, and Donovan returned to his interrupted task of making a round of cocktails. The other guests had already arrived—the two chorus girls mentioned by Campbell, and another woman whose occupation might not have desired a public announcement, and two business men who dabbled in liquor-selling on the side.

One of the chorus girls, Flo Kennedy, looked like the wax clothes dummy that can be observed in shop-windows, and hardly showed much more animation, except that when she spoke, the figure became slightly more crude and less aloof. Her round face was inhumanly symmetrical below her dark brown hair, and its expression was, well, a no-trespassing sign, over the composed expectation of masculine advances. She wore a short-skirted thing of terra-cotta silk and cream lace, and flesh-colored stockings rolled just below the knees, and black pumps. Her companion, Grace Henderson, was a short, slender, Jewish girl in a jauntily



plain black gown, with bobbed, blondined hair and a mincing, sensuous glisten on her face—pretty in spite of the tell-tale curve at the end of her nose. The third woman, Madge Gowan, was silent and dark, with a half-ugly, long face, whose shapely cheeks and chin partly diminished the opposite effect, and a fully curved, strong body.

One of the business men, Sol Kossler, a Jew in his early forties, was roly-poly and half bald, with a jowled, broad-nosed face on which smug and sentimental confidences were twined—one of those merchants who succeed more through luck than because of hard shrewdness—while the other, Al Simmonds, was robust but not stout and had a shock of wavy black hair, and the depressed face of a man who knew that he was hoodwinking himself, in his life and thoughts, but could not spy any other recourse. In their neatly pressed and creased gray suits, both of the men looked as though their objective were the immaculate erasure of individuality.

The conversation reverberated with continual laughter. The men expected each other to utter wise-cracks, and digs at each other's weaknesses, and humorous tales, and each one was constantly egging the other on to self-surpassing retorts. The women were not expected to do much except listen, and laugh or smile at the right places, and join in the intervals of more placid gossip about theatrical people, and indicate a sexual responsiveness without becoming demonstrative (sex would have been boresome to all of them without the assumption of gayly parrying uncertainties, even



though they knew in advance what the night's outcome would be, pro or con).

To Blanche, they were an emptily hilarious lot, out for the usual things that men and women wanted from each other, and merely laughing and idling on the way to them—not at all interested in the big, serious things of which she had had a revealing glimpse—but they *were* funny at times, and it *was* pleasant to be a young woman patently desired by men, and the chance to be amused and self-forgetful for one night was not to be sneezed at. She joined in the repartee between Kossler and Donovan.

"I hear you sold some shirts to Mayor Kelly the other day," Donovan said. "One more vote shot to hell."

"I voted for him last time when he bought them from Sax and Mulberry," Kossler retorted. "Li'l Sol can't be corrupted, 'less it's some one of the other sex, and even then, corrupted wouldn't be exactly the word, y'know."

"Yes, interrupted would be better there," Donovan replied, as the others laughed.

"Why d'you want to vote for a fellow like Kelly?" Blanche asked. "He's just a wind-bag—always telling how much he's going to do for the public, but that's where he ends."

Kossler lifted his eyebrows—women were not supposed to be interested in politics (middle-aged club-women, and professionals in both parties, and socialists excepted).

"Now, girly, what d'you know about it?" he asked,



indulgently. "They've all got to promise a lot—that's in the game—but old Kelly's better than the rest of them at that. He's dead honest and he can't be bought."

"So's 'n elephant," Blanche retorted. "You can buy one cheap at the Bronx zoo and put him up at the next election."

Donovan looked pityingly at her and said: "My Gawd, another socialist."

"I'm not, but I come from the Hell's-Kitchen district and I'm wise to politics, all right," Blanche answered.

"Everything you say is right with me," Simmonds interjected. "It's a foxy-pass, anyway, to argue with a woman at a party—you'll end up by singing: 'Sitting in a co-corner, that's all I do-o.'"

"Maybe it is," said Blanche, while the others laughed.

Flo and Grace regarded her with a petulant suspicion—she was of the smart, snippy kind, and furthermore, she'd better not try to go after *their* men; they'd pull her hair out if she did.

"Now, you all stop razzing my Blanche," Campbell broke in. "She's just a little girl trying to make both ends connect in the big, wicked city."

"Razzing her!—it's just the other way," Simmonds said. "D'you ever balance a hot coal on the tip of your nose?"

"It only looks that way—I was out on a party last night," Campbell replied. "I heard a good one, though, the other day. Tom Jarvey was walking along the



street, and he runs into Hammond, the village cut-up. 'I hear you was seen walkin' with your grandmother the other day—that's a nice thing to do,' said Hammond. Jarvey comes back: 'She didn't look that way when I married her—you know how it is.' "

The rest of them laughed, and Grace said: "That's like the husband I ditched last year. He was a prize-package until I saw him putting his false toofies in a glass uh water one night. Hot snakes!"

"Let's call it a draw and put the phonograph on, and fox-trot," Flo said.

The party broke into dancing, with regular intervals in which rounds of cocktails circulated. The silently dark woman sat on a couch, with a fixed smile, and occasionally chatted with Donovan, and seemed to be outside of the party, as though she were viewing it with a satiated and good-natured patience. Blanche sat beside her for a short time.

"You don't seem to be enjoying yourself," Blanche said, "or maybe this is how you do it."

"Oh, I'm a good listener, and I don't dance if I can help it," Madge Gowan replied. "I'm not down on the world, it's not that, but I like to sit in the audience now 'n' then. It's fine for your nerves and you get a different slant at what's going on around you."

"I'm a little like that, myself," Blanche answered, "but this is my night for mixing in, I guess."

Campbell pulled her away for another dance, and she reflected on the dark woman, through the touch of haze forming in her own head. Was that the way you



became around thirty-five, if you couldn't stay blind to the world and the people in it?

The party became more boisterous, and the innuendoes grew warmer and less attired, and the chorus girls sat beside Kossler and Simmonds and exchanged kissing and impolite embraces that were not quite direct. Donovan had his head on Madge Gowan's shoulder, while she caressed his hair. Blanche, who was standing beside the phonograph, with Campbell's arm around her waist, felt confused, and merrily indifferent to everything except the unsteady exaltation in her body and the singing carelessness of her emotions. As she had done so many times before, she made an effort to pull herself together and resume some portion of her secret wariness, but the effort was a weak one, this time, and her "silly," lightly unarmored feelings persisted and grew stronger.

"Let's leave, Joe dear, I'm so-o-o diz-z-zy," she said.

"Sit down a while, you'll feel better," he replied, leading her to the couch.

The two chorus girls departed with Kossler and Simmonds, after a loudly gay *mêlée* of words had flown back and forth, and Blanche, by this time, was too limp and dazed to bid them good-bye. When Donovan returned from the front door, Blanche had slumped back upon the couch, and Campbell said: "Darned if she hasn't passed out, Jack."

Donovan grinned at his friend.

"We'll put her on the bed in the spare room and let her sleep it off. I'm going to turn in, now, with Madge.



Don't do anything your mother wouldn't approve of, Joe."

Madge Gowan rose and looked steadily at Campbell.

"How about leaving the poor kid alone, to-night?" she asked.

"Don't be foolish, she's 'n old flame uh mine," Campbell answered. "We've been crazy about each other for more than two years now."

"Well, let her sleep with me, anyway," Madge persisted. "You cān see her to-morrow morning."

"Now Ma-adge, don't butt in where it's not needed," said Donovan chidingly.

"Yes, cut out the guardian-angel stuff," Campbell said, in a careless voice. "She's 'n old sweetie uh mine, I'm telling you."

Madge turned and looked down at Blanche, in a dully sad way.

"Oh, well, it's no business of mine," she said.

When Blanche woke up on the next morning, she looked at the strange room with an uncomprehending, ferocious ache in her head. Then, in a detached fashion, incidents of the past night began to bob up in her head, and she pieced them slowly together, in a stumbling, erratic way. She'd met Campbell and gone to a party with him, and then she had become drunk and everything had grown slowly darker. She remembered vaguely that she had begged him to take her home. . . . Then, an indefinable stirring within her



heart told her what had happened. . . . So, he had sneaked off, afraid to face her now—the coward, the coward. But perhaps he was still in the place, and . . . where was she, anyway? She opened the door and walked unsteadily down the hallway. Yes, this was the same parlor where the party had taken place—same piano and furniture. Perhaps Campbell was sleeping in another room in the apartment.

She returned to the room that she had left, and sat down. The pain in her head gave an added edge to the anger within her. The skulking meanness of it—oh, she'd love to break his head in two! Then another voice within her said: "You know perfectly well that's what almost any man'll do, 'specially 'f he's drunk, as well as you are. Don't act like a school-kid—you knew it all the time, but you kept on drinking last night, long past your limit . . . fool."

Her anger against Campbell subsided to a more practical disgust. If she had loved him, she would not have minded this finale, but as it was she felt like a swindled imbecile. Campbell would have to be put in his place once more, and treated with a cool aloofness. He had benefited by an accident wedded to her own weakness, and the only grim satisfaction left would be to ignore him from now on. She didn't blame him, particularly—all men seemed to be cut out of the same stuff—but it would have to be impressed upon him that his victory had been an empty one, and that she was still her own mistress. After all, she still felt intact and undisturbed—it would take more than a dozen Campbells to break her spirit—and she would



sever her relations with him merely as a matter-of-fact self-protection.

When she had washed, and dressed herself, she walked back to the parlor and pulled back the shades at the window, and looked down at the street far below. It was crowded with people and vehicles—the hour might be around noon. She glanced back at a clock on the top of the sideboard. Eleven-thirty—she would have to telephone the “Parlor” and give them the old illness-excuse. . . . Where had every one disappeared to—where was Donovan, who lived in the apartment? She heard the front door close, and she sat down, waiting, and shrinking a little . . . she didn’t care to meet any one at this exact moment. Campbell walked into the parlor, and when he saw her, he greeted her with a solicitous joviality.

“We-ell, there she is—fresh as a daisy ’n’ everything,” he said. “I’ve bought some stuff and we’ll cook breakfast on Jack’s little electric stove. He’s still dead to the world, I guess.”

She rose from the chair, without answering, and walked to the hallway, where she removed her coat and hat from the rack and started to put them on. He followed her and dropped a hand on her shoulder.

“Now, what’s up?” he asked.

“We’re never going to see each other again,” she replied, “and I’m not very anxious to talk to you. I don’t blame you for anything, but you’re not the kind of a man I’m looking for. You’re just no better ’r worse than most people, that’s all. I’d feel just the same about it ’f you hadn’t acted like you did. I held



on to you because you could make me laugh and forget my troubles, but I knew it couldn't last much longer."

"Don't act like desp'rate Tessie in a movie-film," he said. "Come on, sit down and let's talk it over. Nothing so terrible has happened."

"I'm not worrying about what happened," she answered. "'F I cared for you I wouldn't give it a thought. I don't, though, and there'd be no use in risking a second dose of the same fool stunt. We'll call it quits now, and stop seeing each other."

"Well, I've got something to tell you, and it won't hurt you to sit down a minute and listen," he urged.

"All right, just a few minutes, and then I'll be going," she said, wearily.

They sat on opposite chairs in the parlor, and as he looked at her, an irresistible impulse came to him. She certainly did have a marvelous spirit and independence—no girl of his acquaintance had ever acted with such a careless, untouched remoteness on the morning after, unless she was a plain hooker—not in a way that convinced you of its genuineness, at any rate—and, strangely enough, as he sat here now, she was still as desirable as she had ever been. Well, guess he would have to take the plunge—you couldn't resist it forever. The old chain-and-jail wind-up.

"I want you to marry me, Blanche," he said. "I'll go down to the Municipal Building with you this afternoon, and we'll get the license. I mean every word of it. You're an ace-high full to me and I can't give you up. I guess I've always been in love with you, but I didn't want to admit it to myself. You'll marry me



to-day and we'll live happy ever afterwards, just like they do in the books."

He looked at her with a confident, admiring smile, as though her assent were predetermined. She arose and smiled pityingly at him, as she tucked her hair beneath her hat.

"Listen, Joe, I wouldn't marry you on a bet," she replied. "You prob'bly think I've been egging you on to ask me all the time, and there's where you've made a big mistake, Joe Campbell. 'F I ever marry any man I'll have to be wild about him, and 'f I am, I won't even care so much whether he marries me 'r not. And, what's more, I'll have to have a pile of respect for his mind, and I'll have to feel like listening to what he says, all the time."

He stared at her, without answering.

"Well, it's no use talking any more," she said. "So long, Joe, I'm going now."

He had expected that she would first doubt the sincerity of his proposal and then eagerly accept him. He still believed that she was merely leading him on, to revenge herself, and that all of her words had been said for their effect, and that she only wanted him to be persistently begging and humble. He followed her into the hallway, and caught her arm.

"I'm sorry for what happened last night," he said. "I'll make it up to you, Blan. I mean it, dear. I'm crazy about you, and I want to make you happy, and I'll do anything you say. Why, I'll even stop drinking, if you say the word. You've just got to marry me,



you've got to, Blanche. You know you care for me, you know you do."

"You'd better guess again, Joe," she said, coolly, as she broke away from him. "I'm not going to see you again, and what's more, don't pester me with any 'phone-calls 'r letters, either. It won't do you a bit of good. . . . Good-bye, and good luck, old boy."

It gave her a surface thrill to slap his face in this dramatic and careless fashion. He thought that he was a precious catch, didn't he? Well, he might lose some of his huge conceit after she had finished with him.

He caught her arm once more.

"Come on, you've razzed me enough now, haven't you?" he asked. "I've been taking it like a man, but don't smear it on so thick. Come on, be good to me, Blanche."

She broke away again and walked swiftly down the hallway. He started after her and then halted, still and perplexed, as she reached the door. Then a rage quickly possessed him—imagine, this hussy turning *him* down after he had been really anxious to make amends.

"All right, then, you can go to hell for all I care," he called after her, as she was passing through the doorway.

She made no reply as she slammed the door behind her—he could have said that immediately and spared himself the trouble of his other words. These men, they thought that all they had to do was to utter the magical words—ma-arry me—and a girl would be de-



lighted at the rare, luring condescension and instantly fall into their arms. Well, perhaps he wouldn't be quite so conceited from now on—the cheap sneak. When she married a man it would be soberly and of her own free will, because she longed to hear his words, and be physically near him, and because she looked up to his mental gifts, and good taste, and re-fine-ment. Oh, ye-es, in a way she was an idiot for not having accepted *Campbell's* proposal, since he could certainly have given the leisure and opportunities which she craved, but . . . she'd be damned if *she* would ever marry a man just because she was ashamed to leave him on the day after a drunken party!

After she had telephoned the "Parlor" and told Madame Jaurette that she could not come down because of an intense toothache, she returned to her home. Her mother had gone to the butcher shop and Mabel was sitting alone in the living-room.

"Well, sma-artie, where've you been all night?" Mabel asked. "Ma was in a awful stew about you—she was gonna call up the p'lice, but I stopped her. An' *pa*, he's gonna ask you *some* questions when he gets back, believe me."

"What's all the fuss about?" Blanche asked, wearily. "I went to a wild party and passed out, and they had to let me sleep there overnight."

"An' Joe Campbell, he got lost in the crush, 'r else he went back to his place to sleep, I s'pose," Mabel answered, sarcastically. "You c'n tell it to ma but not to me. I never thought you'd give in to him that easy, Blan. He hasn't asked you to marry him, has he?"



"Yes, but I turned him down," Blanche replied.

"Turned him down—well, of all the fool things," Mabel cried. "I'll bet you're jes' sayin' you did 'cause you don't want to admit what a simp you've been."

"No, it's true . . . he wanted to marry me right this afternoon."

Mabel was silent for a moment, as she regarded her sister with an irritated surprise, and then she said: "You've got me guessing. Here's a fine fella, not so bad-lookin' either, an' you've been goin' with him, off and on, f'r over two years, an' he's got loads of money, an' . . . you won't marry him. There's darn few fellas that'll ask a girl right after they've slipped one over on her. What 're you waitin' for, anyway?"

"Not for anything you could understand," Blanche responded. "When I marry a man I'm going to love him first—that's what you can't get into your head—and it'll have to be real love, too, and not just because he has a handsome face and knows how to kid now and then."

"Then why'd you stay with Joe last night?" Mabel asked. "'F you're so darn up 'n the air about it, you didn't have to peel your clothes off f'r a fella you don't care about."

"I passed out of the picture, and the next thing I knew it was morning," Blanche said, trying to be patient with this querulous, unseeing sister of hers, but feeling a rising strain.

It was bad enough that it had happened—why did she have to paw over the details?

"Well, he played a dirty, rotten trick on you then,"



Mabel answered, indignantly, "an' 'f it was me, I'd sure get back at him some way. 'F I didn't wanna marry him, then I'd scare him outa his wits an' make him come across with plenty uh money, I would. 'R else I'd see he was sent to the hospital f'r a nice, long stretch."

"It was my fault just's much as his," Blanche replied, dully. "No man's 'n angel, and a girl shouldn't get drunk with him 'f she doesn't want to go the limit. I can usually take care of myself, but I took too many cocktails last night. I was feeling blue and forgot when to stop. 'F you want to do me a favor, then you'll talk about something else. I'll never see him again, and he doesn't matter to me."

"Try an' talk to you," Mabel responded, disgustedly. "The last person you ever look out f'r is yourself. You ought to be sent to the booby-hatch!"

Blanche went into her room without answering . . . what was the use? Mabel meant well enough, but she couldn't see that money and gay times and "getting back" at people were not the only things in the world.

When her mother returned, Blanche pretended to be asleep, and she remained upon her bed until evening, with all her thoughts darting about and then hopelessly evaporating, and with occasional intervals of semi-drowsiness. When she came to the supper-table, where the remainder of her family were seated, the firing started.

"Well, give an account uh yourself," her father said. "Where was you till twelve this morning?"

"I stayed with some friends," Blanche answered—



she wasn't *afraid* to tell them the truth, of course not, but she wanted to avoid the senseless wrangling, and the loud accusations, and the outraged advice that would ensue if she did. "I drank a little too much and I had to sleep it off, that's all."

"An' how about Campbell—was he with you?" her father asked, gruffly.

"He was gone when I woke up this morning," Blanche answered, seeking only to brush aside her father's words.

"Well, it sounds damn fishy to me," her father replied. "'F he did anything wrong to you I'll have it out with him, and he'll have to marry you then, 'f he knows what's good f'r him."

"That's what I say," Harry broke in. "I like Joe all right, but he'd better go slow with any sister uh mine, I don't care 'f he was the Gov'ner himself!"

"You're getting terribly concerned about me all at once, aren't you?" Blanche asked, speaking to Harry. "You'd better not jump at conclusions—you don't know a thing about it."

"I'll make it my business to find out," Harry answered, looking steadily at her.

"Well, I'm gonna stick up f'r Blanie this time," Mabel said. "You're both makin' a big fuss about nothin', an' what's more, you've got no right to be sayin' she's a bad girl. You oughta be ashamed uh yourselves. All she did was stay overnight with some people she knew 'cause she wasn't in no condition to come home. I've done it myself, once 'r twice, an' you never waded into me. Blanche may be a nut in some



ways but she's not fool enough to let Joe Campbell put it over on her, an' you oughta believe her."

Blanche gave her sister a grateful, surprised look—Mabel did have a good streak in her, in spite of her blind reproaches.

"I'm not accusin' her of anythin'," the father said, impressed by this defense from his favorite daughter. "I only wanted to find out what happened, like any father would. 'S a matter uh fact, you'd both better cut out all this booze you're swillin'. 'F you don't, you'll wake up some fine mornin' an' find yourselves in f'r it."

"An' they oughta stay home more, too," the mother said, breaking in with her endless complaint, not because she hoped to effect anything, but merely to maintain her position. "I was worried to death, I was, when I got up this mornin' an' Blanie wasn't here. You never can tell what'll happen to a girl, you never. Don't I read all kindsa things in the paper ev'ry day—murders 'n' rapes 'n' what not!"

"I'll see that they stay home—they're runnin' too loose to suit me, these days," the father replied.

He knew that he would do nothing of the kind, but the words soothed his sense of authority.

When the supper was finished, Blanche put on her hat and coat, and said: "I'm going out for a walk. I'll be back early, I guess."

"You'd better," her father responded. "I won't swallow another stayin' over with friends story, this time."

Blanche turned away without replying—words,



words, and what did they all amount to? Threats, and promises, and "reasons" . . . and people scarcely ever meant them.

After she had left the apartment she strolled aimlessly up one street and down another, craving the motion that could add a fillip to the dullness of her thoughts. Would she ever meet people who could help her, and who would understand her longings and prod her with worthwhile criticisms and encouragements—people, for instance, as superior to Rosenberg as Rosenberg had been to the rest of the men whom she knew? How could she run across them? . . . As she walked along, different men stopped beside her for a moment, with their "Nice evening, isn't it?" and "You look sorta lonesome, how about it?" and "Pardon me, but haven't I met you somewhere before?" and "D'you mind if I talk to you a while?" Sometimes they called to her from automobiles, but they were merely irritating reminders of a real and grossly intruding world, and she ignored them—it never paid to take a chance, for they always turned out to be common and cheap. It stood to reason—why would an enticing man be so "hard up" that he would have to solicit women on the street?

She didn't know where she was going, but she wanted to imagine that she was searching for some destination that would greet her unexpectedly—a vague, half-laughed-at hope—and she kept on strolling down the hard, flatly dirty, noisy streets.







## **PART TWO**







## PART TWO

THE night became thickly intense, and all the angular details and flat expanses of each street—neither hideous nor beautiful but vapidly and rigidly perched in between—took on the least touch of glamor. Some semblance of a darkly plaintive heart began to sway and quiver within the scene, as though the essence of all these human beings pacing down the sidewalks and sitting or standing in shops, cars, and restaurants, had joined the night and formed another quality—expectations, illusions, and promises, all electric in the air. The harshly dreamless industries and shallow loiterings of the day were replaced by an effort at romance, soiled but persistent, and a sensual pride preening itself with gallantries, and a confusion of cruel or softly dozing confidences.

The moving-picture theaters, in dots of red, yellow, blue, and green light, made proclamations of spurious, quickly attained love, adventure, and suspense; the United Cigar Stores, framed by red and gold, displayed their mild, brown opiates, while within them deferential clerks catered to jovial or importantly sulen men and women; the restaurants, with food heaped in their windows, and glistening fronts, were filled with people intent upon turning a prosy stuffing into an elaborate, laughing ritual; and even the Greek lunch-



rooms, with their stools beside half-dirty glass counters, and nickel coffee-urns, assumed a hang-dog grin.

Taxicabs in all the cardinal colors darted about, like feverish insects serving human masters, and the people in them—lazy, or impatient, or bored, or out for a lark—made a blur of faces sometimes glimpsed more distinctly as the cabs stopped or slowed down. Policemen in dark blue uniforms stood at street-crossings, with tired aggressiveness, looking for a chance to invest their flunky-rôles with a rasping authority. Motor-trucks lurched along like drab monsters barely held in leash. Lights were everywhere—in shops, on iron poles in the streets, mellowly staring from upper windows—desperately seeking to dismiss the darkly fearful mystery of the surrounding night, but never quite overcoming it.

Street-cars and "L" trains crawled on, soddenly packed with under-dogs going to their dab of rest or crude pleasure. A roar was in the air, with immediate, sharp sounds trailing out into it—a complaining, shackled savage floating up from the scene. The large buildings were without individuality, except that some of them rose vertically above the others, and in their dull shades of red, brown, and gray, they would all have presented a yawning, meanly barrack-like effect but for the relieving fancy of their lights. Even the perpendicular strength of the skyscrapers was marred by filigreed and overcorniced lines.

To Blanche, the scene was a *mêlée* of delightful possibilities always just eluding her, and obnoxious intrusions only too ready to seek her arm. She realized



the transforming effect of the night and said to herself: "Say, I'd never do all this walking if it was daytime—funny, how everything gets more attractive when the night trots along. Guess you can't see things so clear then. . . . Better chance to kid yourself along."

As she strolled through the outskirts of Greenwich Village her legs began to feel heavy, and the past hour seemed to be nothing more than a long, senseless walk taken within the confines of a large trap. The light, hazy sensation of searching oozed slowly out of her body and was replaced by the old hopelessness.

She stopped in front of a batik-shop window and looked at the soft, intricately veined gaudiness of the smocks, blouses, and scarves. "Sorta crazy, yes, but she'd like to wear them—they suited her mood." Another girl was standing beside Blanche, and the other turned her head and said: "Aren't they beauties, though. I'd just love to buy that purple and green smock there in the corner."

"I like the blue one better—the one right next to yours," Blanche answered naturally, but she looked closely at the other girl.

It was not unusual for strange girls to speak to you when they were either lonely or just brightly interested in some little thing, but still you had to be careful—sometimes they were "fast" players with men, in need of a feminine accomplice, or grafters intent on securing some favor or loan. The other girl had a slender torso and almost slender legs, with all



of her plumpness crowded in the buttocks and upper thighs. She had singed butterflies on her face and they gave a light, fluttering pain to her smiles. She had the rarity of large blue eyes on a duskily pale brown face, and small, loosely parted lips, and a slight hook on the upper part of her nose, and curly bobbed brown hair. In her tan coat trimmed with dark fur, scarlet turban, and multicolored silk scarf, she seemed to be a dilettantish, chippy girl, just graduated from the flapper class.

Blanche noticed something "different" in the other girl and answered her more readily as they continued their talk.

"D'you live in the Village?" the other girl asked.

"No, I'm from uptown," Blanche answered. "I've heard lots about it, though. I'd like to meet some of the int'resting artists and writers down here. There must be all kinds of them in the tearooms and places like that."

The other girl gave her a pitying look.

"All kinds of fakers, you mean," she replied. "They know how to brag about themselves, but that's where it ends."

"But I thought this was the part of town where real artists 'n' writers came together," Blanche persisted. "Of course, I didn't believe they were all great ones, but I did believe they were all trying to do something, well, different, you know."

"Oh, there *are* some down here, but you don't usually find them in the showplaces or tearooms," the other girl answered, as she and Blanche walked down



the street. "Those places are for the mediocrities, and the pretenders, and the students . . . and, oh, yes, the slummers. People from uptown hunting for something gayly wicked."

"I suppose you think I'm a foolish slummer, too," Blanche said, "but I'm not. I've just been walking along and thinking things over. I didn't realize where I was."

"I wasn't being personal," the other girl replied. "I sort of like the way you talk. Suppose we introduce ourselves to each other?"

They traded names and the other girl, Margaret Wheeler, went on: "You know, strangers are always supposed to distrust each other, but I can't be annoyed. Every once in a while I talk to some girl on the street, and I've started a couple of interesting friendships that way. I'm not a Lesbian and I haven't any other designs upon you."

"Why, I don't distrust you at all," Blanche answered. "I can take care of myself and I suppose you can, too. You talk like you were intelligent, and I'd like to know you better, that's all."

"Thanks," said Margaret. "I would be fairly intelligent, if I didn't let some male make an idiot out of me every few months. I'm in love with some one now, but it'll wind up like all the others."

"You make me feel envious," Blanche replied. "I don't think I've ever really loved any fellow."

"Are you joking?" Margaret asked.

"No, that's straight."

"Well, I'm going on twenty-five now, and I couldn't



count the infatuations I've had. I'm not as easy as I used to be, though. Once upon a time, if a man had a straight nose, and blond hair, and could recite poetry and make me believe it was his, that was all I needed. But no-ow, a man must have some real subtlety, and ability, and wittiness, before I pay any attention to him."

"That's just the kind I've been looking for," Blanche answered. "Where on earth do you find them?"

"Nowhere in particular—it's a matter of luck. And don't forget that a girl must be unusual herself before she can attract unusual men, unless they're just anxious to have a party with her."

"Yes, that's where I'd lose out," Blanche said, heavily. "I'm just a ha-air dresser in a beauty parlor, that's all."

"You certainly don't talk like one. Maybe you've never had much of a chance to be anything different."

"You said it"—Blanche's voice was low and depressed.

"Well, I'm only a steno myself," Margaret answered, "but I'm taking a course in short-story writing at Herbert College—three nights a week. I want to tear off the old veils and tell what people do to each other."

"Say, maybe I could join it, too," Blanche replied, eagerly. "I'm not so strong on grammar, though—stopped in my first year at high and went to work."

"Oh, you can pound *that* part of it into you. The main thing's whether you have something to say—something that's not just ordinary and hackneyed."



"I think I have, but . . . how do I know," Blanche asked, uncertainly.

They had stopped in front of a tearoom with a multicolored wooden sign under an electric light.

"Here's Clara's—one of my hangouts," Margaret said. "I'm going in to meet my blond-haired devastator. Won't you come along?"

"Perhaps I'll be in the way."

"Nothing of the kind—I'll introduce you to some of the people I know."

They entered the place, which occupied the first floor of a two-storey, attic-topped, brick house. Kitchen tables and chairs painted pale green and vermilion lined the walls. Paintings and drawings were hung everywhere—cubistic plagiarisms, slovenly sketches, and illustrations meant for the average magazine's check book but not quite reaching it—and a semidim light came from stained-glass bowls hung from the low ceiling. Some fifteen men and women were scattered around the two rooms, and a portable phonograph in the corner was whining one of the latest fox-trot insinuations—"He Never Gets Tired of Me, No, Boy, Just Never Gets Tired of Me-ee."

Three men and a woman at a table effusively greeted Margaret, and after she had introduced Blanche, the two girls sat down with the others. The third girl, Dora Ruvinsky, was an unsymmetrically fat Jewess, with a thin-lipped but salacious face and a shorn disorder of black hair. Her sex had yielded to a cunning nightmare of masculinity, and she wore a stiff white collar, a red cravat, and a man's vest and coat. She



spoke in a husky drawl and perpetually slapped the shoulders of the men beside her. They regarded her with tolerance contending against a slight aversion.

One of them, Max Oppendorf, a blond-haired man of thirty, plied her with whisky from a hip-bottle and strove to trap her into feminine reactions and remarks, as though he were coldly and listlessly playing with a desperately hypocritical insect. His narrow, pale, blue-eyed face glanced around the tables with pity and repugnance somehow fused into its expression. A recognized poet and novelist, he was nevertheless known as a distinguished outcast, ostracized, attacked, and hated by literary and dilettantish groups of every variety because of his skillful-tongued independence, his careless violations of etiquettes and conventions, and the ravages of his unorthodox intellect. His clothes were shabby but not quite untidy, and as he frequently closed his eyes while speaking, he displayed the contradictory guise of an aristocratic vagabond.

Men almost invariably detested him, while the reactions of the women who met him were evenly divided into a distrustful resentment in one camp and a loyal adoration in the other. His armor was invulnerable, save when he became hopelessly drunk, in which condition he either savagely denounced and affronted the people around him or became unwontedly indulgent and gave them simulations of sentimentality and affectionate attention. These abdications sprang from his innate indifference to life and most of its people. Sincerely believing that most men and



women were beclouded, unsearching, and cruelly *gauche* children, alcohol made his indifference to them more indulgently intent upon distracting itself, and, when drunk, he stooped to them with loud, mock-arguments, and exuberant caresses. He felt a moderate degree of tenderness toward Margaret Wheeler, who appealed to him as an honest grappler, more unreserved and mentally edged than most other girls of her age and occupation. She was violently in love with him, and they spoke together in tones that were almost whispers, and stroked each other's hands.

The second man, Bob Trussel—a gorgeously effeminate youth who was known in Village circles for his not-quite-Beardsleyesque black and whites—conversed with Dora, while the third, Ben Helgin, talked to Blanche.

Ben was a robustly tall man in his early thirties, with a huge, half-bald head, and dark brown hair inclined to be frizzly. His long, pointed nose, severely arched eyebrows, and widely thin lips gave him the look of a complacent, pettily cruel Devil—a street urchin who had donned the mask of Mephistopheles but could not quite conceal the leer of a boy intent upon practical jokes and small tormentings. He was a master in the arts of dramatic exaggeration and belittling, never quite telling the truth and never quite lying, and his immeasurable vanity made him always determined to dominate any conversation. He had an Oriental volubility, and people would often sit beside him for an hour or more and vainly seek to insert a beginning remark or express an uninterrupted opinion.



One of his favorite devices was to tell anecdotes about men of his acquaintance, in which the men were invariably depicted in a childish, ridiculous, or inferior posture, while he gloated over and embellished the details of their fancied discomfiture, with a great assumption of sympathy for the victims. Living in a dream-world entirely of his own making, he loved to flirt with visions, conquests, world-shaking concepts, and child-like boasts. On one morning he would appear among his friends, describing some plan or idea with a cyclonic enthusiasm, and on the very next afternoon no trace of it would remain within his mind. Again, he would loll in an armchair and announce that a famous actress of forty had implored him to reside with her and to become the leading man in her next play, but he would neglect to mention that the lady in question was renowned for her generous impulses and included truck-drivers and cigar-clerks in her overtures. These impositions caused most people to regard him as an eel-like *poseur*, when they were removed from the persuasive sorceries of his words, and they failed to see that his gigantic egotism had sincerely hoaxed itself into the rôle of a flitting and quickly ennuied conqueror.

For years he had followed the luring dream of amassing a large fortune through the creation of dexterously dishonest stories, plays, and press-agent campaigns, and while he had accumulated thousands of dollars in these ways, the dream of wealth persistently refused to be captured. He lacked the grimly plodding, blind instinct necessary for such a goal, and his financial harvests were always quickly gathered and dis-



sipated. This babbling immersion in the garnering of money, however, gave him the paradoxical air of an esthetic Babbitt.

His serious literary creations were original and sardonic at their best, but frequently marred by a journalistic glibness which led him into shallow and redundant acrobatics, or facetious saunterings.

He had known Max Oppendorf for nine years, and they had passed through a comical fanfare of recriminations, friendly invitations, sneers, and respects. Oppendorf secretly disliked him but was at times fascinated by his charming pretenses of *camaraderie*, and the quickness of his mind. At one time, the poet had broken off with Helgin for three years—a withdrawal caused by his discovery of the other man's peculiar and somewhat incredible sense of humor. Penniless, and afflicted with incipient tuberculosis, Oppendorf had written to his friend and asked for the loan of two hundred dollars. A special-delivery letter had flown back to him, containing an unctuously sympathetic note and announcing the enclosure of a two-hundred-dollar check. The rest of the envelope had been empty, however, and believing that the absence of the check was merely an absent-minded error, he dispatched another letter which apprised his friend of the oversight. In response, Helgin had sent him the following telegram: "It was a nice joke—hope you enjoyed it as much as I did."

Helgin had a sincere admiration for the other man's work and a veiled, malicious aversion to the poet's personal side. To him, Oppendorf's life held a supreme



taunt which had to be demolished with falsehoods and ridicule. The poet's unbroken flaunting of moralities, conventions, and compromises, reminded Helgin that his own life had not been equally courageous and defiant, in spite of his endless written shots at average people and their fears, and that, in his personal existence, he had frequently prostrated himself before the very observances which he pilloried, or laughed at, in his books and conversation. This specter could only be slain by the effort to jeer at the opposite man's episodes with men and women, and to hold them forth as clownish and unrewarded capers.

As Helgin sat now, in the boisterous and tawdrily glassy tearoom, he spoke to Blanche with the gracious casualness which he always publicly affected with women. It was a part of his jovially invincible pose to insinuate that he could have been a perfect libertine had he chosen to follow that denounced profession, and that his enormous sexual attractiveness was held in bondage only by his lack of desire and his ability to peer through the entire, violent fraud of sex itself. In the dream-world of his own making, through which he moved, loftily but genially immune to all criticisms, adulations, and importunities, women were the potential vassals whom he disdained to hire.

On the night previous to the present one, his second wife had departed on a visit to her family in a distant city, and he had telephoned Oppendorf and arranged a meeting, prodded by one of the irregular impulses in which his respect for the other man overcame his opposite feelings of envy and aversion. Now, he sat



and chatted with Blanche while she listened with an almost abject attention. This great writer, whose pictures she had run across on the literary pages of newspapers, and in magazines, was actually seated beside her and speaking to her—it could scarcely be true! She recalled that Rosenberg had often lauded Helgin, and that a year previous she had read one of the latter man's novels and had liked its "difficult," thumb-twiddling style and disliked its patronizing, pitying attitude toward the feminine characters. Well, when men wrote about women, or women about men, they never seemed able to become quite fair to each other. They were always mushy and lenient, on one side, or sneering and unsympathetic on the other. She voiced this thought to Helgin, who advised her to cease searching for an unhappy medium. To him, she presented the figure of a worried, heavily questioning peasant girl, dressed and manicured for a more polite rôle, and he had a whim to lure her into expectant admirations and play with her stumbling hungers and wonderings. Usually, he did not waste his time on such girls—they were more to Oppendorf's liking—but for the space of one night he could afford to risk the impending boredom in a more unassuming manner.

"You must get Oppie to compliment you," he said, glancing in the poet's direction. "He does it perfectly. Women cry for it, babies smile, old ladies jump out of their chairs. Come on, Oppie, say something about Miss Palmer's hair. What does it remind you of? A startled ghost of dawn, the visible breath of afternoon?"



Oppendorf turned from his whisperings with Margaret, and smiled—a patient but slightly threatening smile.

“Are you ordering a tailormade suit or buying a box of cigars?” he asked, sweetly.

“The comparison isn’t quite fair to your poetry, Oppie,” Helgin answered, in the same sweet voice.

“Monseigneur Helgin, apostle of fairness, sympathy, and tolerance—know any other good ones, Ben?”—the poet’s smile shone like a sleeping laugh.

“Your hair is like a tortured midnight—that was a nice line, Oppie,” Helgin answered pensively, as he ignored the other man’s thrust.

“The actual phrase happens to be ‘transfigured midnight,’” Oppendorf said, in an ominously subdued voice. “You substituted the word tortured to make the line meaningless, of course.”

“Sa-ay, wasn’t that tormented night stuff in *The Duke of Hoboken*, Ben’s last novel?” Dora Ruvinsky asked, poking Oppendorf in the side.

“Yes, among other frantic mendacities,” Oppendorf answered, as he looked compassionately at Helgin. “The ancient Chinese had an excellent proverb: ‘When your stilettos have failed to penetrate the actual figure, erect a ludicrous dummy and belabor it with an ax.’”

“The Chinese usually come to your rescue,” Helgin retorted, “but you don’t seem to realize that *The Duke of Hoboken* is simply a gorgeous and delirious fantasy. It wasn’t meant to be an actual portrait of you.”



"Yes, you were more innocent than you imagined," Oppendorf answered, still smiling.

"Oh, stop all of this polite quarreling, Maxie," Margaret interposed, as she looked at Helgin with an open dislike. "Helgin sits in his little phantom palace, bo-oored and genial, and when you cave in the walls he scarcely hears you."

"Your own hearing is just a trifle more adoring, isn't it?" Helgin asked, as he looked at Margaret with an expression of complacent malice.

"Yes, it needs to be, if only to counteract yours," Margaret replied, tartly.

"Call it a draw, and let's talk about purple chrysanthemums," Oppendorf interjected.

When people persisted in clinging to one subject he was always reminded of scrubwomen endlessly scouring a pane of glass, unless the theme was exceptionally complex.

"Dear me, can't I say something else about the sweet Duke?" Trussel asked, as he stroked his hair with the fingers of one hand. "It's screamingly amusing, really. Lots of the critics have always attacked Mr. Helgin's books, you know—called them stilted and, well, overcynical. That sort of thing. But no-ow, dear me, what a change! Why, they're all simply showering praise on the dear Duke of Hobok'. Of course, there isn't any connection between this change and the fact that little Dukie is supposed to be a biting caricature of Mr. Oppendorf."

"No, of course not," Oppendorf replied, thoroughly amused now. "In the same way, three thoughtful



chorus girls were observed last night, floating in a huge balloon as they crossed the peninsula of Kamchatka."

"People are always talking about the dead," Helgin said, in a bored voice. "The indecent vagaries of critics are not interesting to me. They might be vastly engrossing to some entomologist, though."

"Oh, you're all a lot of bugs," Dora said, as she caressed Margaret's arm while Margaret regarded her with a resigned look that said: "Well, I suppose you *must* do this."

"You're crazy, and you take yourselves so darn seriously it gives me a pain!" Dora continued. "Come on, let's have another drink and act like human beings."

The conversation changed to a game in which the others bantered with Dora and laughed at her amiable but scoffing retorts. Blanche, who had been bewildered and almost awe-stricken ever since her introduction to these people, began to listen and observe with a clearer, though still strongly respectful, attitude. They were the people whom she had always longed to meet, and they knew much more than she did, and they were bold creators while she was only despairing and partly tongue-tied, ye-es, but still, they were by no means perfect. They wasted so much time in slamming each other as cleverly as they could, and while they were always good-natured about it, you couldn't fail to spy the malice beneath at least half of their smiles and remarks. They never expressed any whole-hearted liking, or sympathy, or placid interest in their reactions



toward each other, and their talk reminded her of a game in which each one strove to make his "come-back" a little "smarter" and quicker than that of the others. Yet Oppendorf alone seemed to be different. The others, with the exception of Margaret, were always trying to twit or arouse him—something about him seemed to plague them almost against their will—and never quite succeeding. His eyes were sleepy and retiring, and he closed them half of the time during his conversation. When he laughed or raised his voice now and then, it was in a jerky way, "like some one else" was pulling some strings tied to him. Funny man . . . what had given him this air of tired sadness? Well, at any rate, she could never fall in love with him—he was too much like a careful ghost!

The man whom she loved would have to be robust, and natural, and, well . . . sort of eager to be alive, in spite of the fact that he knew all about the shams and meannesses which life held. Yes, that was it . . . he'd be glad, and a little hopeful, in spite of all the rotten things he saw and heard.

She began to talk more frankly, her tongue loosened a bit by the two drinks of whisky that Oppendorf had given her.

"Say, why don't all of you just call each other liars and boobs, and have it over with?" she asked, with a smile.

"At an early age, I was confronted by the choice of using the other side's tactics now and then or becoming a hermit," Oppendorf replied, in his deliberate way. "I am still direct enough, however, to be ostra-



cized by practically every literary party or group in New York."

"I admire your indignation," Helgin said to Blanche. "Ride us all on a rail and tell us what vicious double-dealers we are."

He had decided to egg her on for purposes of entertainment.

"It wouldn't have the least effect on any of you," Blanche answered, composedly. "Besides, I'm only a stranger and I really haven't any right to criticize. You're all doing things—real things that amount to something—and I'm just a hair-curler in a Beauty Shop."

"Listen, here's a tip—never be modest when men are around," Margaret said, gayly. "They think little enough of women as it is, and they're *always* looking for a chance to walk over us."

"Oh, it's too much trouble not to be honest," Blanche retorted, lightly. "Let them try to wa-alk, for all I care."

"Have you ever written, or painted?" Oppendorf asked, liking the contradiction of her humble brassiness.

"I *have* fooled around with ideas of being a writer, but I'm afraid I don't know English well enough for that," said Blanche, uncertainly.

"Don't take up writing, Miss Palmer—it's only an excuse for laziness," Helgin said. "That's probably why so many young people try to toss off stories and verses. They have just a bit of imagination and they



don't like the prospect of slaving in father's shoe store or helping mother bake the evening pies."

"There must be a more important reason than that," Blanche replied, soberly.

"Yes, it's barely possible," Oppendorf interjected. "It's a habit with us to take our profession somewhat flippantly. That's to avoid giving the impression that we're too much in love with ourselves."

"Funny, you do manage to give the impression, anyway," Blanche answered, as she made a grimace.

Oppendorf and the others laughed, and Helgin said: "So, you've been carrying that little dagger all the time. Bright gal."

"Not at all—just trying to imitate your style," Blanche retorted, merrily.

The others had been regarding her as a meek and abashed apprentice in their realms, but now they began to pelt her with more respectful badinage, with the exception of Oppendorf, who watched her with a sleepy stare of approval and remained silent. This girl wasn't half stupid at bottom, but just ignorant of many things.

The group repaired to Margaret's nearby studio and danced to a phonograph and slipped into varying stages of tipsiness. Helgin did not dance, but sat in a corner and talked to Blanche. He became mellowly garrulous and somewhat less malicious, and he regarded Blanche as a fumbling but slightly diverting barbarian—diverting for a night or two at least. They were mildly interesting as long as they clung to their ferocious sassiness, but they always wound up by



becoming girlishly wistful, and pleading, and more disrobed. He began to tell her anecdotes of his past, in which he was always laughing, penetrating, and triumphant at somebody else's expense, and she listened eagerly. My, but this man certainly knew how to talk! He was always getting the best of people—you had to take at least forty per cent off from any fellow's claims in that direction—but he really was a great writer, and he knew so many words and handled them so gracefully.

Urged by a perverse whim, he invited Blanche to come with him to a party which he had promised to attend on the following night. The affair was to be a gathering of literary and theatrical celebrities and near celebrities, together with their latest fads and fancies in human form, and it might be amusing to bring this blunt, would-be highbrowish, young hairdresser and see whether the assembled pedestals would overwhelm her.

While Blanche suspected that he was playing with her and had only the impulse to grasp a flitting distraction, she felt delighted at this second opportunity to meet "famous" writers, and artists, and actors, and as she accepted the invitation she said to herself: "He thinks I'm just a snippy nobody, and he wants to show me off and then see what happens—like letting the puppy run loose in the parlor. Oh, I know. But what do I care? I might make friends at this party with two or three people just as intelligent as he is, and maybe more honest."

While Helgin left her emotionally unaroused, she



was nevertheless dazed by his vocabulary and his mental swiftness, which she frequently had to stumble after, and a little flattered by his talkative attention, in spite of herself. The genially wise-cracking, quizzically aloof, and patronizing air, which he never deserted, irritated her but did not drive away the spell of her attention. After all, he made Rosenberg, the most intelligent man in her past, sound like a stuttering, yearning baby. Funny, how you changed! She had once looked up to this same Rosenberg, as though he were a luring and puzzling god. Well, that was life—listening and clinging to people until you grew beyond them. The only man whom she could permanently love would be one always a little superior to her, and urging her to catch up with him, and kindly waiting a little now and then, so as not to get too far ahead of her.

When she reached her home she felt tired but “up in the air.” A long, hopeless stroll and a chance acquaintanceship had really led her into a new world—it was like a fairy tale, wasn’t it? Helgin had remained in the taxicab, after arranging to meet her at Margaret’s studio on the following night, and hadn’t even attempted to hold her hand . . . not that that mattered, though she was a little curious to know how men of this kind “went about it.”

He had refrained from touching her because it would have disrupted his nonchalant posture—the meticulous avoidance of sexual defeat with which he kept his egoism intact. He was like a watchman, ever alert in front of a towering but shaky house of cards.

It was 2 A.M. when she entered her bedroom, but



her mind was still spinning and darting about, in spite of her physical weariness, and, moved by an irresistible desire, and a sudden confidence that had been born from her surprising evening, she took a pad of paper from one of her bureau drawers and sat up in bed until 4 A.M., writing a sketch of the tearoom she had visited, and the people within it. The sketch was crude and at times ungrammatical, but it had an awkward sense of irony and humor which clung to small, insufficient words or hugged inappropriately long ones, and it was filled with clumsily good phrases such as: "They made a lot of noise and then whispered like they were ashamed of it," or "She had small eyes and they got smaller when she talked," "She was wearing a daisy, georgette thing and she acted like it." Sturdily, but with little equipment, her thought bent to the novel wrestle with words on paper, and she felt an odd, half-uncertain thrill when she had finished the sketch. Did it have anything to it, or was it entirely bad? Well, she'd show it to Helgin or Oppendorf on the next night and get ready for the old cleaver. Nothing like trying, anyway, and curiously, she felt a beautiful relief now, as though she had emptied herself for the first time in a way that approached satisfaction.

On the next day she was drowsy but cheerful at the Beauty Parlor, managing somehow to stagger through the quick-fingered details of her work, but experiencing a rising strain. This would never do—she would have to be wakeful and at her best for the coming party. It wouldn't be like going out with some silly



man, feigning to listen to his "I am it" gab, and leaving him around midnight, with several yawns and the usual, semievaded kiss and hug. Through using the reliable excuse of serious illness in her family, she succeeded in leaving the shop at three in the afternoon, hastening home and sleeping there until nearly seven. When she sat at the supper-table with the rest of the family, Harry said: "Say, I've got some news for yuh. Ran across Joe Campbell on Broadway an' had a long chin-fest with him. He says he begged yuh to marry him the other night and yuh turned him down flat, but he's still leavin' the prop'sition open. Believe me, I wouldn't, if I was him. He asked me to tell yuh, anyway."

"How interesting," Blanche replied. "Suppose you tell your friend, Mister Campbell, to go to the devil."

"Now, Bla-anie, that's a nice way to talk," her mother cried. "I'm ashamed of you, I am. He's never done you no harm, far's I know, an' he's been acourtin' you for over two years now, an' besides, he's gone an' made you 'n hon-rable pruposul. You could do lots worse than marryin' him, you could."

"Listen, have I got to go through this whole thing over again?" Blanche asked, exasperated. "I wouldn't marry Campbell 'f he had ten million and owned the subway system, and there's no sense to this endless jawing match we put on. You can't understand me and you never will—it's not your fault, you just can't, and what's more, you ought to realize it by this time. I'm going my own way and you might as well leave me alone."



"Is that so," her father replied, with a dull, puzzled anger shining in his little eyes. "I-is that so. You're jest a stranger here, I s'pose, an' you've dropped in tuh have supper with us. Sure, that's it. I'm not your father an' I've got nothin' tuh say about you, huh? You've got a lot of nerve f'r a person your age, you have."

"Yeh, she's gettin' a swelled head, all right," Harry said. "Guess I'll have to beat up 'nother one uh her phony guys, an' tone her down a bit."

"Oh, you're just full of wind," Blanche answered, indifferently.

Mabel had been listening to Blanche with a mixture of reluctant loyalty and annoyance—this "nut" sister of hers was certainly impossible to understand, but Campbell had "done her dirty" just the same, and Blanche had a perfect right to detest him, and it was about time that the family stopped nagging her on that subject. Mabel's antagonism against men and her regarding them as a would-be preying sex made it imperative that she should be on her sister's side in this question, almost against her will.

"I know Blan's a nut, but stop razzing her about this Campbell stuff," she said, glancing disapprovingly around the table. "The way you all rave about him a person'd think he was a king 'r something. He's just like other fellows—waving his dough around an' trying to put it over on ev'ry girl he meets. What do you want to do anyway—tie Blan up an' carry her down to the license-bureau? She oughta have some rights around here."



Taken aback by this unexpected defense from Mabel, and not being able to think of any immediate and adequate retort, in spite of their emotional opposition, the parents and Harry lapsed into a short silence, after which they returned to minor complaints and jovialities. It was easy to battle with Blanche, who outraged all of their petted hopes and ideas, but when Mabel contradicted them, their feeling of innate kinship with her placed them in a temporarily bewildered state in which they wondered whether they might not be slightly wrong. Philip, who had squirmed distressedly in his chair and tried to look unconcerned, according to his custom, secretly prayed for Blanche to revolt and leave home. It would be better for her—she'd be happier then, in her crazy but rather likably independent way—and if she did there'd be some peace around the flat, for the first time.

Blanche, who had felt relieved and a little unwillingly affectionate as she heard her sister's support, drew back her chair to leave the table.

"Going out to-night?" Philip asked casually, as he rose.

"Yes, I'm invited to 'n exclusive party . . . artists and actors—real, famous ones that people talk about," Blanche replied, not being able to resist the desire to voice her proudly anticipating mood.

"Fa-amous, huh," Harry said, with a sneer. "Well, you'll sure be outa place there, 'f they are."

"Peddle your wise-cracks somewhere else," Blanche responded, unruffled.

"We-ell, I don't care what they are 'cept that you'd



better not come skiddin' in after breakfast," her father broke in, gruffly.

What his girls did was their business as long as no one "had the goods on them" and they kept out of trouble, but at the same time he didn't intend to stand for any open flaunting of their possible transgressions. If a girl came home just before dawn, at the latest, she might only have been "cutting up" at some wild party or night club, but if she returned later than that, then it was evident that she had stayed over night with some man.

As Blanche stood before her mirror, engrossed in the half-piteous and half-brazenly hopeful ritual observed by most women—that of applying cosmetics to her face—a lyric rose and fell in her heart, separated by skeptical pauses. At last she had a chance to leap from the greasy, colorless weights of Ninth Avenue, and the cheaply frothy interludes of Broadway . . . but was it only a fair-faced dream? Would the people in the other impending world laugh at her, or turn their backs? Again, all of them might turn out to be qualified versions of the group she had met at Clara's—mischievous, sneering Helgins, weak and pouting Trussels, unwomanly Doras, Margarets indifferent to every one save the men at their sides, and perhaps another approach to Oppendorf—another intriguing but palely distant figure.

The lyric rose once more and slew the specters. What an expert she was at borrowing trouble! It was quite possible that at least two or three of the people whom she was to meet would act friendly toward her



and invite her to other gatherings, or perhaps a really fetching man, more naked and decent than Helgin, would fall for her.

As she walked down Ninth Avenue to the Elevated station, the scene incited tinglings of disgust in her whereas, usually, she regarded it with a passively acceptant dislike, as the great, solid ugliness from which she could not escape. Now, different objects in the scene affected her as though she had been pummeled in the face. The garbage cans at one side of the entrances, frequently overbrimming with decayed fruit, soiled papers, and old shoes and hats; the pillars and tracks of the "L" road, stretching out like a still millipede, with smaller insects shooting over its back; frowsy women, with sallow, vacant faces, shouting down from upper windows; dirt-streaked boys, wrangling and cursing in hallways; drab blocks of buildings cramped together, like huge, seething, shoddy boxes; and clusters of youths on each corner, leering as though they could scarcely control the desire to leap upon her.

All of it scraped against her nerves. Why had she remained so long within it?—it should have become unendurable years ago. Well, what choice had she ever had?—an unpleasant hallroom in some rooming-shack. She could not afford more than that. But why, oh, why, was she so depressed on this evening of all others—this evening when for the first time she had something novel and promising to look forward to? The lyric started again and the black pause terminated. She became more in tune with an insidious, dodging



gayety that somehow survived the grossness of Ninth Avenue and sounded in the mildly warm air of the late spring evening. In the dark-brown duvetyn dress that stopped at her knees, black chiffon turban, flesh-colored stockings and brown pumps, she could almost have been mistaken for some society girl on a slumming tour.

When she reached Margaret's studio, Helgin and Oppendorf had already arrived and were immersed in a game of dice for dimes, while Margaret finished her toilette. The studio had a low, broad couch covered with dark green taffeta and batik cushions, and gaudily painted furniture, and a little kitchenette and bathroom adjoined it. Helgin greeted Blanche in the affable boyish way which he could affect for moments—the miraculous atom of humility sometimes flitting to the surface of his poised urbanities.

"Are you prepared to be thrilled?" he asked her, as she seated herself.

"Listen, I'm a hard-boiled egg from Hell's Kitchen, and I don't thrill so easy," she answered, with the impudent desire to shatter his smiling condescension.

"Well, well, little tough Annie from behind the gas works," he said. "How did you manage to stuff your boxing gloves into that vanity case?"

"Don't need them—bare knuckles where I come from," she retorted, smiling back at him.

"Stop it, Ben, you've met your match this time," Oppendorf called out from the armchair where he was pensively eying a tiny glass of gin held in his right hand. "The awkward fighter can always beat the



clever one if he stands and waits for Sir Cleverness to rush him."

"Oppie always instructs me—he can't bear the thought of my being vanquished," Helgin replied, lightly.

"Well, I don't know, I *have* managed to bear it now and then," Oppendorf said, before swallowing the gin.

"Didn't both of you promise me not to be sarcastic for one night?" Margaret asked, as she entered the studio. "If I had the muscle, why, I'd spank the two of you!"

"Start with Ben—it might change his entire life," Oppendorf said, grinning.

"Oh, you're not so sweet-tempered yourself," she replied, as she pinched his cheek.

"You're quite right, I'm a snarling, vituperative, vindictive man until your smile creates a miracle within me," he said, as he bowed low to her.

Whenever Oppendorf liked a woman he treated her at times with a whimsical pretense of courtliness and deference, merrily overdone enough to make the whimsicality apparent.

"How easy it would be to believe you," she responded, with a sigh that carried off the vestige of a smile.

"Emotions are never false—even the 'masquerade must become real before it can be persuasive," Oppendorf answered, quickly changing to a mien of abstracted, impersonal challenge. "When the reality survives for a long time it is called sincere and true, and



people have faith in it. It may be just as real for a moment, an hour, six days."

"You're a sophist and a promiscuous wretch, and I'll probably wind up by hating you," Margaret said, as she slid into his arms. "Just as a person begins to depend on you . . . you flit away . . . I know."

"Why does a woman hate a man when he departs with an honest abruptness?"—Oppendorf shifted to the inquiry of a distressed child. "Or, why do men hate women for the same reason? I am immersed in you at present because you contain qualities which I cannot find in the other women around me. To-night, perhaps, or in a month from now, I may meet another woman who does possess them, together with other qualities which you lack. In such a case, my immersion would naturally transfer itself. God, how human beings detest everything except the snug, warm permanence which is either a lie or an unsearching sleep!"

"There's nothing logical about pain, Max," Margaret said. "It *must* be deaf, and angry, and blind, and pleading, until it dies down. When a girl's lover goes off, her mind can say: 'He revived and stimulated me, and I'm glad I did have him for a while,' but just the same her heart still cries out: 'Oh, he's mean, and selfish, and treacherous, and I hate him!'"

Although she was conversing with Helgin, on the couch, Blanche had caught bits of the other couple's talk, and they brought a worried tinge to her heart. Oppendorf was wrong—in very rare cases a man and a woman *could* love each other forever. Of course, the cases were rare simply because people deeply har-



monious in every way, from their dancing-steps and tastes in clothes down to the very last opinion in their minds, hardly ever met each other. That was it. It was simply a question of luck as to whether you'd find this one person in a million or not.

Helgin called out: "Well, Don Juan's defending himself again. He's more convincing when he doesn't talk. Come on, Oppie, stop the necking for a while and join us. You're falling into the boresome habit of dropping into a lady's arms for hours and spoiling the party."

"I never object to other people taking the same privilege," Oppendorf replied, placidly, as Margaret slipped from his lap.

"Perhaps we're not as impatient as you," Helgin said, grinning.

"Or perhaps you hide your impatience more patiently—there are so many possibilities," Oppendorf retorted.

"Say, Oscar Wilde once opened a small-talk shop—the store has been well patronized ever since," Blanche said, flippantly.

The line wasn't her own—it had been in the last novel she had read—but she wanted to see what its effect would be on these men, and whether it would impress them.

"The gal's improving," Helgin replied. "Come on, take off your little costume. You're a college-student trying to write, and you thought you'd be more interesting if you posed as a slangy hair-dresser."



"The best way to fool you people is not to pose at all," Margaret said, smiling.

"It's not a bad idea—I've tried it myself," Oppendorff interjected.

"Ti-ti-tum, come on, let's go to the party," Margaret interrupted. "You can all keep it up on the way over."

After they were all in a taxicab and speeding uptown, Helgin said to Blanche: "Didn't you give Oppie a manuscript at the studio?"

"Yes, it's something I wrote about the tearoom where we sat last night," Blanche answered. "He's such a frank man, and I know he'll tell me whether it's just trash, or not."

"It's becoming very amusing," Helgin continued. "Nowadays, if you meet a manicurist you never know when she's going to stop polishing your nails and draw the great, American lyric out of her sleeve, and the waiter at the café tries to induce you to read his startling, unpublished novel, and the bootblack shoves a short-story under your nose. None of these people would dare to attempt a painting or a sonata. The popular superstition is that literature consists of a deep longing plus thousands of words thrown helter-skelter together."

"Well, it doesn't hurt them to try—they'll never find out what their ability is, 'f they don't," Blanche replied, defiantly.

"That's right, don't let him razz you," Margaret broke in. "Masefield was once a bar-room porter, you know."



"Please pick out a better example," Oppendorf said. Then he turned to Blanche.

"Your grammar is atrocious at times, but you have originality, and there's a razor in your humor," he went on. "Keep on writing, and study syntax and the declensions of verbs—they're still fairly well observed by every one except the Dadaists. I'll have you in several magazines in another two months. And thank God you're not a poet. If you were, you'd get fifty cents a line, mixed in with profound excuses!"

"Do you really mean it?" Blanche asked, delightedly.

"Of course."

"Why, I'll work like a nigger 'f I can really make something of myself as a writer," Blanche cried, enraptured.

"I hope you're not giving any pleasant mirages to Miss Palmer," Helgin said, wondering whether Oppendorf was not merely seeking to flatter her into an eventual physical capitulation. "I know your weakness. When we were getting out *The New Age* you'd plague me every day with verses from girl-friends of yours, and they were always rank imitations of your own style."

"You seem to have the delusion that every beginner, with a sense of irony and a deliberate style, is an echo of mine," Oppendorf replied, undisturbed. "You'd treat these people with a flippant impatience, but I'd rather err on the side of encouraging them, unless they're saturated with platitudes and gush."

"Yes, you *are* apt to make such mistakes, especially



in the case of some pretty girl," Helgin said, with a malicious grin.

"Have it your way, Ben," Oppendorf responded, indifferently.

Blanche listened with a serene confidence in Oppendorf—he never lied about anything connected with writing: somehow she felt sure of that. Literature was too serious a matter to him.

For a moment Margaret looked a little jealously at Blanche, pestered by the suspicion that Oppendorf might have praised Blanche's work as a first move toward conquering her—a suspicion which Helgin had known would be caused by his words. Then Margaret remembered how he had viciously assailed her own short-stories just after her first meeting with him, when he had known that she would have prostrated herself before him for the least word of praise, and with the remembrance her doubts perished.

"Be on your good behavior to-night," Helgin said to Oppendorf. "Vanderin didn't want to invite you, but I convinced him that you had become a chastened and amiable gentleman. I wouldn't like to see you thrown down the stairway—it gives smaller people a chance to gloat over you."

"Are you really as wild as all that?" Blanche asked, looking incredulously at Oppendorf's subdued pallidness.

"The stairway myth is one in a celebrated list," Oppendorf replied. "You'll find many of the others in Mr. Helgin's affectionate tribute to me—his last novel. The list is a superb one. I deceived some



social-radical friends by pretending to defy the draft laws during the war. I faked a broken shoulder and sponged on some other friends. I was caught in the act of attempting to ravish a twelve-year-old girl. I leap upon women at parties and manhandle them while they shriek for mercy, in contrast to the other men present, who never do more than audaciously grasp the little fingers of the same ladies. The amusing part of it is that none of my actual crimes and offenses are on the list. I could give my admirers some real ammunition if they would only ask me for it."

"But why do they tell such hideous lies about you?" Blanche asked naively.

"I'll tell you why," Margaret broke in, indignantly. "It's because they hate him and fear him. He gets beneath their skins and mocks at all their little idols, and squirmings, and compromises. They want to pulverize him, but he hardly ever gives them any real opportunities, so they're reduced to falling back on their imaginations and insisting that he's a clownish monster. It's a beautiful system of exaggerations, all right! If he happens to be drunk at a party, it's immediately reported that he was pushed down the stairs, and if he's seen stroking a woman's arm it's always said that he hu-urled himself upon her."

"It must be troublesome to hear your perfect lover so sadly maligned in spite of his eloquent assertions of innocence," Helgin said, smiling. "Most of the stories are really told in admiration of his savage gifts."

"Yes, the admiration is both profound and imagina-



tive," Oppendorf retorted, with a weary return of the smile.

Blanche listened to the others with feelings of uncertainty and dismay. How could refined, serious, artistic people act so rottenly toward each other? They weren't so very much different from the toughs in her neighborhood, except that they used words while the gangsters and bullies employed their feet and fists, or fell back on guns and knives. The gangsters were far less dangerous, too. They could only hurt a person for a short time, or else kill him and send him beyond any further injury, but these artist-people with their mean tongues and their sneering stories could damage some one for the rest of his life, in different ways. Oh, well, maybe most people were always alike, except that some of them were clever and had minds, while others were more inept and stupid. What real difference was there between the endless digs which her new acquaintances traded and the catty remarks which she heard every day at the Beauty Parlor? Still, she made a mental reservation in the case of Oppendorf. He had to retaliate or keep quiet, and he never started any of the sarcasm, as far as she could hear, though he certainly could finish it! If he had only been physically stronger, and more blithely animated, she could have fallen in love with him. This ideal man of hers!—she'd probably never meet him. It only happened in story-books. But, at any rate, she intended to apply herself to writing and feel of some importance for a change. How relieved and happy she had been after putting down the last



word of her tearoom sketch—it had been almost the first real thrill in her life.

When she entered Paul Vanderin's large, high-ceilinged studio and spied the Juliet balcony that ran around two sides of it, with rooms leading out on the balcony, and the profusion of statues and paintings—most of them weird or fiercely unorthodox—and the grand piano, and the abundance of luxurious furniture in neutral shades, she sighed and slipped a hand over her eyes. How delirious it must be to live in a place of this kind—big, and high, and filled with conveniences and intensely interesting objects—and how different it was from her own small, ugly room, with the ceiling hemming you in as though you were in a cage. Life was so darned unfair—lavishing favors, and stimulations, and beauties on some people and treating others in the most grudging and miserly fashion. Well, that was an old story—no good to rave over it. You had to beat life to its knees somehow, sharpening your mind and trying to express yourself, and praying for luck.

Several people had already gathered in the studio, and as she walked beside Helgin in the round of introductions, she opened her mouth and felt stunned at the discovery that some of them . . . were negroes! This was really astonishing—she had never dreamt that cultured, artistic white people mingled with black and brown men and women on terms of familiar friendship! Her head felt in a turmoil and she couldn't decide whether these contacts were right or wrong, whether she herself could join them without shrinking.



Of course, human beings were all equal and shouldn't look down upon each other because the color of their skins varied, but . . . didn't it go much deeper than that? Wasn't there a physical repugnance between the different races—a strong feeling that simply couldn't be overcome? Certainly, she had always thought so.

She had spoken to negroes, and Japanese, and Chinamen before, and had even joked with them—elevator boys, and porters, and waiters, and laundrymen—but she had never cared for their physical proximity and had always felt repulsed if they happened to brush against her. But still, they had been unrefined and ordinary, while these negroes were intelligent and cultured, and spoke about art and psychology. This was a revelation, as she had never imagined that negroes of this kind existed, except in the ratio of one to tens of thousands. She had heard vaguely of Booker T. Washington, and famous negro lawyers, and, oh yes, a negro writer named Du Bois, whom Rosenberg had always talked about, but she had thought that they were rarities and had even felt a flitting pity for their isolation among their own race.

Of course, she had been foolish and thoughtless—there was no valid reason why negroes should not voice their feelings and search for beauty and uniqueness, instead of always clinging to some business or manual labor. They were human beings, too, and their hearts and minds were probably often much more restless than those of most white people. Besides, since these white writers and artists mixed with negroes, it must be that society was gradually begin-



ning to approve of this union and was losing its prejudice in the matter. Still, perhaps these negroes and whites simply talked to each other, or danced together, without any sexual intimacies. Surely, there was no harm in that.

As she sat beside Helgin she voiced her perplexity.

"Say, I never knew that black and white people went to the same parties," she said. "I don't quite know what to think of it."

"Oh, yes, it's the latest fad among white dilettantes," Helgin replied. "They became weary of their other enthusiasms—finding a tragic, esthetic beauty in Charlie Chaplin and other slapstick comedians, and raving over East Side Burlesque Shows, and making Greek gladiators out of flat-nosed prize-fighters, and hunting for love in Greenwich Village. They are now busily engaged in patronizing and eulogizing the negro race. Vanderin is one of the ring-leaders in the matter. It tickles his jaded senses and reassures him of his decadence, and provides him with material for novels."

"But isn't any of it sincere and honest?" Blanche inquired.

"Certainly—negro and white writers and artists are actually starting to tear down the age-old barriers," Helgin responded. "What begins as a fad can end as an avalanche. I really hope it happens."

"But . . . but tell me, do negro and white men and women have anything to do with each other?" Blanche asked, falteringly.

Helgin laughed.



"Do you see that couple over there?" he asked. "The tall, Nordic kid and the mulatto girl in red. They're always together at every party. Of course, white men have had negro mistresses in the past, with everything veiled and a little shamefaced, but this is different. It's out in the open now, and it's on the basis of deep mental and spiritual understanding."

"I don't want to be narrow-minded," Blanche answered, "but I don't see how they can love each other—they must be lying to themselves. The races just weren't meant to have physical relations with each other. There's something, something in their flesh and blood that stands between, like . . . like a warning signal. That's it."

As she spoke, though, she had the sensation of uttering sentences which she had borrowed from books and other people, and which did not decisively express her opinions.

"Oh, it doesn't last long, usually," Helgin said. "It's not often that they live permanently together and raise families, but the infatuations are fierce enough while they last. And even intermarriage is becoming more common."

"We-ell, I'd like to talk to a negro boy, 'f he were intelligent and brilliant-like, you know, but I don't think I could fall in love with him, even then," Blanche replied. "You can't reason about it . . . it's there, that's all."

Vanderin walked up and spoke to Blanche. He was a tall, robust man with gray hair and a half-bald head and a ruddy, mildly sensual face. His speech and



manners were genially suave and yet reserved, and there was something about his large eyes that resembled the look of a child playing with toys to hide its weariness.

"You don't mind our mixed gathering, I hope," he said to Blanche. "I find the negro race to be very congenial, and just beginning to wake up. There are negro painters and poets here to-night who are quite able to stand shoulder to shoulder with white creators."

"Tell us all about their plaintive, erotic, defiant quality," Helgin said. "You do it well, Paul—come on."

Vanderin laughed as he retorted: "You'll have to read it in my next book, old skeptic. I'm not giving lectures to-night."

"But won't you tell me something about them?" Blanche asked, pleadingly. "I'm a frightful simpleton in all these matters, but I do want to find out about them."

Helgin rose and joined a group, while Vanderin sat down and conversed with Blanche. He fascinated her as he told her grotesquely humorous, slightly bawdy anecdotes of Harlem's night life and spoke of cabarets where negroes and whites danced and frolicked with a savagely paganish abandonment, and described the motives and longings behind negro music and writing. According to Vanderin, negroes were pouncing upon the restrained and timorous art of America and revitalizing it with an unashamed sensuality, and more simple and tortured longings, and a more grimly questioning attitude of mind.



As Blanche listened to his silkenly baritone voice she reproached herself for her lack of a warm response toward this persuasive, exotic man. His mind intrigued her but her heart still beat evenly. She seemed to sense something of a huge, amiable, carelessly treacherous cat within him—one who lazily and perversely hunted for distractions and amusements, without allowing anything or any one to move him deeply, and who could become cruel or disdainful in the tremor of an eyelash. Why did all of the mentally luring men she had ever met fail to overpower her emotions? So far, her heart had been moderately stirred only by mental weaklings or frauds. Oh, dear, this business of searching for an ideal was certainly a shadowy mess!

Vanderin excused himself to greet some new arrivals, and Margaret dropped into his chair.

"How do you like the hectic fricassee?" she asked, half waving her hand toward a boisterous group of negroes and whites, who stood with arms interlocked.

"I'm very confused about it," Blanche said. "One part of me, now, it says, 'Come on, Blanie, be a good sport and don't be prejudiced,' but there's another part, you see, and it sort of shrinks away, and wonders, well . . . and wonders how they can kiss and hug each other."

"Listen, you ain' seen nothin' yet," Margaret answered, jocosely. "I've been to parties where white and colored people were doing everything but, and they weren't lowbrows, either. Real artists, and writers, and actors."



"Well, how do you feel about it?" Blanche asked.

"I couldn't do it myself, but I'm not intolerant," Margaret said. "Some people have this instinctive, physical aversion to other races, you know, and some just haven't. I've talked to colored men for hours and felt very immersed in what they said, but I could never have spooned with them."

"Well, I'm probably built the same way, but I'm not at all sure about it," Blanche responded. "I'm not sure about anything, to-night. It's all too new to me."

A tall, jaunty, colored youth whisked Margaret away, and a portly, courtly man wearing shell-rimmed spectacles sat down beside Blanche and began to tell her all about an immortal play which he had written, but which the managers were hesitating over because it hadn't strolled into the box-office. The playwright was garrulous, using his arms as a sweeping emphasis for his remarks, and Blanche wondered whether she was listening to a genius or an untalented boaster. Some day she'd meet a man who didn't claim to be superb in his particular line . . . some day snow would fall in July.

The gathering became slowly silent as Vanderin announced that a poet was about to recite. The poet, a young negro, Christopher Culbert, read some of his sonnets, in a liquid and at times almost shrill voice. He had a round, dark brown face, and a body verging on chubbiness, and his verses were filled with adored colors and a sentimentality that flirted with morbidity for moments and then repented. He was



effeminate and jovial in his manner, and after the reading he returned to his place on a couch beside another negro youth. Then another man, blackish brown and with the body of an athlete, sang spirituals, with a crazy, half-sobbing, swaying quaver in his voice. A curious blending and contrast of elation and austerity seemed to cling to him. As he intoned the words of one song : "Ho-ow d'yuh kno-ow, ho-ow d'yuh kno-o-ow, a-t the blo-od done si-ign mah na-a-me?", Blanche felt shivers racing up and down her spine. These negroes certainly had something which white people couldn't possibly imitate—something that made you feel wild, and sad, and swung you off your feet! It was hard to put your finger on it—perhaps it was a kind of insanity.

When the singer had finished, Vanderin announced that Miss Bee Rollins, of the Down South night club would do the Charleston dance. She stepped forward—a palely creamish-brown skinned young negress with a lissom body incongruously plump about the waist, and an oval face, infinitely impertinent and infinitely sensual in a loosely heavy way. She twisted and bobbed and jerked through the maniacal obliquely see-sawing and shuffling steps of the Charleston, with a tense leer on her face, and inhumanly flexible legs. She was madly applauded and forced to several encores. Then the party broke up into dancing and more steady drinking, with different negroes playing at the piano, and the assistance of a phonograph in between.

The dancers undulated and embraced in a way that surprised Blanche—even in the cheap dance halls



which she had frequented, the floor-watchers always immediately ordered off all couples who tried to get away with such rough stuff. Well, anyway, it wasn't the main part of these people's lives—their only thrill and importance—as it was with the dance-hall men and women. The couples in this studio were only "cutting up" between their more serious, searching labors and expressions, and they were certainly more entitled to be frankly sexual, if they wanted to.

Blanche stepped over the floor with several negro and white men, and enjoyed the novelty of dancing as extremely as the other couples did, though she felt the least bit guilty about it—it certainly was "going the limit." As she danced with the negroes she felt surprised at her lack of aversion to the closeness of their bodies. Somehow, they danced with a rhythmical, subtle, audacious fervor which her white partners could never quite duplicate, and she was swung into a happy harmony with their movements in spite of herself.

As she was catching her breath between dances, she watched some of the negroes around her. One of them, a short, slender girl in a dark red smock and a short black skirt, was conversing with a white youth in a dark suit, who looked like a solemnly tipsy mingling of clergyman and pagan. She had a pale brown skin, black curls of bobbed hair, thin lips, and a pug nose. She held his hand and gave him distrustfully tender looks.

Blanche caught fragments of their conversation.

"You don't love me, hon. . . . You can get white girls prettier than I am—I know. . . ."



"I don't want them . . . you've put a song in my blood, right in it. . . . I'm crazy about you."

"I don't think you mean it. . . . Lord knows, I'd like so to believe you. . . ."

"You will, you will. . . . I'll take care of that. . . ."

He kissed her and then she withdrew, saying: "You funny, funny, dear, impatient boy!"

Another young negress with a dark brown skin and a tall fullness to her body, was laughing violently beside a thin, white man with a little black mustache and a petulant face. She sang: "Mamma has her teeth all filled with goldun bridges 'n' diamon's small, but po-oor papa, po-o-or papa, got no teefies at a-all."

"Not this papa," he replied. "I'll prove it to you."

She drew back, laughing, while he sought to embrace her. They almost collided with a young negress who was dancing with a middle-aged white man. She was slim, with a straight-nosed, creamy face and straight brown hair, while her partner was floridly jowled and had the symptoms of a paunch, and sparse, black hair. They stopped their dance and stood, talking.

"Have you seen the Russian Players?" she asked.

"Yep, went down last night and took in that version of Carmen—'Carmencita and the Soldier.'"

"Aren't they a curious mixture of restraint and hilarity? It's a contradiction—a sort of disciplined madness, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, they have dark, strange, patient souls, and yet . . . they can be wildness itself. And they're entirely obedient to the designs of the playwright.



They never let their personalities swagger all over the stage at the expense of the author."

The two walked off, still talking, and Blanche eyed them regretfully as she wished that they had remained within hearing. Most of the men and women at the party seemed to be disinclined to talk about impersonal subjects. Their only aims were drinking, dancing, and making love to each other. Of course, they were tired of their more sober professions and the heavier problems in life, and wanted to forget them for one night at least—but this explanation scarcely lessened Blanche's disappointment. She was longing to hear discussions on art and psychology—matters that were still semishrouded to her. She had been to tens of parties where people were "running wild" and fox-trotting and mauling each other—it was nothing new to her.

She answered the teasing remarks of the man beside her with abstracted monosyllables, and watched another couple—a tall, dark, negro youth, with the face of a proud falcon, and an ample-bodied white woman in her early thirties, with a round face void of cosmetics but like an angelic mask that could not quite hide the jaded sensuality underneath it. She leaned closely against his side while he stroked one of her arms and looked at her with an almost scornful longing on his face. Blanche gazed intently at them—this was an exception. All of the other mixed couples that she had noticed had consisted of negro girls and white men, and she had been on the verge of believing that the women of her own race were only tolerantly "fool-



ing around" and had no deep response to the colored men. But no, she was wrong. Another white woman and a negro youth were whispering together on the piano-bench, with their heads almost touching and their right hands clasping each other.

How queer it was—even she had succumbed to the spell of the negroes, while dancing with them. They were like wise children—they could be abandoned and serious in such a quick succession, and there was an assured, romping, graceful something about them. Still, loving any one of them would probably be impossible—she still shrank a little from the nearness of their bodies, when the sorcery of the dances was removed.

The teasing man departed, thinking her an odd iceberg, and another man sat beside her. She turned to look at him. He was of her own height and had a muscular body, a pale white skin with the least tinge of brown in it, and straight, light brown hair brushed back. His lips were thin below a narrow nose, and his large, gray eyes seemed to be full of silent laughter, as though the scene were an endurable but trivial comedy to him. In his tuxedo suit, well fitting and distinctive, and with his athletic, graceful body, that was neither too narrow nor too broad, and the high-chinned but not supercilious poise of his head, he could have been mistaken for some movie hero more natural and finely chiseled than most of the other stars in that profession.

He looked at Blanche and smiled—a smile that was respectful but had the least touch of impudence.



"I haven't been introduced to you—I came in rather late," he said, easily. "My name's Eric Starling."

"Mine's Blanche Palmer," she replied.

"Isn't it rather silly—this trading of names right off the reel?" he asked. "They're just empty sounds until people get to know each other, and then, of course, they do begin to suggest the qualities within each person."

"My name's even more meaningless, if that's possible," she answered. "I haven't done a thing to make it of any importance. Not a thing."

"Well, you're not gray-haired, yet—unless you dye it," he said, with a boyish geniality. "You have still time enough to conquer the world."

He had a soft and low, but unmistakably masculine voice, that pleased her.

"Yes, a girl can keep on telling that to herself until there's no time left," she responded.

"How doleful you sound," he replied. "Have a heart—you'll make me confess my own pessimism in a minute, if you keep it up."

She laughed softly.

"No, you're still young—you have plenty of time to conquer the wo-o-orld," she said, mimickingly.

"I was only trying to be pleasantly conventional," he responded. "Lord knows, I'm a child of night myself—morbid moods, and hatreds, and despairs. I do try to tone it down, though. The world may be a muddled and treacherous place, on the whole, but if you never laugh about it, then you let it interfere too



much with your work. I don't know why I'm telling you all this—you're probably not interested."

She liked his tone of quiet self-disparagement and understanding resignation—the absence of the usual masculine: "Look me over, kid, I'm there!"

"Of course I'm interested," she said. "It's this way —'f you go around and laugh too much, why, then it's just like taking dope, and then again, 'f you don't laugh enough, you see, you get too wise to your own smallness. There's never any cure for anything, I guess."

Up to this time he had regarded her only as a handsome girl, a bit more unaffected and humorous than the general run, but now he felt a much keener interest. She had something to say—an intriguing oddity among women. Who was this girl, with her dark red hair in bobbed curls, and her jaunty, Irish-looking face, and her words divided between whimsicality and hopelessness? Perhaps she was a talented person, well-known in her profession and amusing herself with this posture of half-smiling and half darkly wistful obscurity.

"You're probably quite famous and rebuking me for not having heard of you," he said, after a pause.

"I don't think Madame Jaurette would agree with you," she answered, smiling.

"Mother or dancing partner?"

"She owns the Beauty Parlor where I work—I'm just a common hair-dresser, that's all."

He looked closely at her—was she persistently jesting?



"No fooling—come clean," he said. "You're not really."

"Oh, I know, I'm not like my type," she answered. "I think a little, and I don't use slang very often, though I like it sometimes. Don't be deceived so easy."

"Well, I'll bet you're trying to do something different, anyway," he said, convinced now that she was telling the truth and engrossed in this phenomenon of a seemingly intelligent and searching Beauty Shop girl. "You could tell me you were a scrubwoman and I'd still know instinctively that your job had nothing to do with your ambitions. It's in all your words and all the expressions on your face."

She felt glad that his response had not been one of veiled pity, or sexy flattery, or the polite ending of interest, and her heart began to quicken its strokes. Say, could he be the man that she had been looking for? Could he? Silly, oh, very silly dream, and one that could scarcely be changed to a proven reality by a few beginning and possibly misleading words, and yet . . . she *was* attracted by his appearance—stalwart and yet subdued, with no "fizz" about it—and she liked immensely everything he said.

"My family's poor and I've had to work to earn my own living," she said, simply. "I live in the toughest part of Ninth Avenue—I was born and raised there. The people I come from think that art's the second word in 'Thou art bughouse.' Now you've got the whole sad story."

"Well, seeing that confessions are in order, I'll spill



mine," he answered. "I was brought up in a neighborhood where they throw paving-blocks at each other to prove the sincerity of their feelings. One of them hit me once, but it didn't seem able to knock any obedience into me. Oh, ye-es, nice, little neighborhood."

"'F it's any worse than Hell's Kitchen it must be a peach," she replied, thoroughly unreserved and immersed in him now.

"It is—Peoria Street in Chicago," he said, smiling. "If I could escape from Peoria Street, you'll probably be able to get out of Ninth Avenue with one wing-flutter and a little audacity! I'm working for a Harlem cabaret now—Tony's Club. Publicity man . . . writing the blurbs, and arranging the banquets, and getting the celebs to come down."

"I'm quite sure you're different from most publicity men, I can just feel it in your words and in the looks on your face," she answered, in a mocking voice.

"Lady, I'll never feed you that medicine again—the taste is simply frightful," he replied.

They both laughed and felt relieved about it.

"D'you know, I've got a writing bug buzzing in my head," she said, after a short pause. "It really started only a night ago—I never dared to believe I could do it before. I was down to Greenwich Village for the first time, and when I came back I wrote a sketch of the tearoom I'd been in. I didn't think it amounted to very much, but Max Oppendorf, the poet, you know, he tells me it's really clever and original, in spite of the shaky grammar. I'm going to keep on writing,



you see, and he's promised to criticize my stuff and try to put it over for me."

"I think I met Oppendorf once," he replied. "He's tall and blond, isn't he?"

"Yes, that's him—he's here to-night."

"You didn't come with him, did you?"

"No-o, don't be scared," she said, in raillery. "He's with a girl friend, Margaret Wheeler, and my, how they're gone on each other. It always seems to annoy them when they've got to talk to somebody else."

"Who'd you come with?"

"With Ben Helgin, the novelist. I only met him and Oppendorf last night, and I'm only a curiosity to him. He just wanted to see how the slum-girly would get along in the mi-ighty studio. I hope he's satisfied now."

"Do you know, people who patronize and bend down all the time, do it as a hop-fiend sniffs his cocaine," he said. "They might have to take a close peek at themselves otherwise."

"Isn't it the truth," she answered. "When I think of all the dopes people use to kid themselves along, I get the Jailhouse Blues. I was just as bad myself, two or three years ago, before I commenced to get wise to myself."

A pause came, during which they looked at each other with a budding and almost incredulous desire.

"By the way, I have another confession to make," he said. "Close your eyes and take the blow. I'm one of those dreamy, high-handed, impossible poets you've heard about. Vanderin likes my stuff and he's induced



Koller, the publisher, to take a first book of mine. I grind it out between the times when I'm slaving down at Tony's."

"Three cheers," she answered, delightedly. "Perhaps we can put our heads together now, and maybe you'll help me with my work. I know you must have much more education than I've got."

"Oh, I did work my way through two years of college, but I stopped after that," he said. "It was too dry, and heavy, and, well, conservative, to satisfy me. A million don'ts and rules and rules and boundaries. They're all right to know but they're not so sacred to me."

"Well, I envy you, anyway," she replied, sighing. "You've got to help me with my grammar—that's the big, weak sister with me."

"You can bet I will," he responded, eagerly.

She was certainly an unusual girl—one who had somehow commenced to force her way out of a vicious, muddy environment. Since he had partially freed himself from the same thing, it was a sacred duty to help her. But he wouldn't do it for that reason alone—he liked the jolly and yet pensive turn of her, and the undismayed and candid twist of her mind, and the soft irregularities of her face, which were charming in spite of their lack of a perfect prettiness, and the boldly curved but not indelicate proportions of her strong body. Of course, it was nonsense to believe that you could fall in love after several minutes of talking, and there was Lucia, the clever little hoyden whom he had gone with for two years now, and Clara, savage, beau-



tiful, and dumb, and Georgie, keen-minded enough but a little hysterical at times, and promiscuous, and . . . But after all, none of them except Lucia had ever aroused him to any depth of emotion, and even that had long since begun to wear off. She was mentally shallow—women usually turned out to be that, after you penetrated their little tricks and defenses. Would this girl prove to be of the same kind? Maybe, maybe, but there was one thing about her that he hadn't found in any other women—the instant, frank, ingenuous way in which she had intimately revealed herself, without all of the wriggings and parryings common to her sex. They sure did hate to get down to brass tacks.

He was an odd confusion of sentimentalities and cynicisms, and the conflict between them was often an indecisive one. As he looked at Blanche, a fear suddenly shot through him. . . . Lord, he had forgotten. The old, dirty scarecrow that would probably turn her away from him.

"D'you know, I was certainly surprised when I came here to-night," she said. "I never imagined that negroes and white people—real, artistic ones, I mean—I never imagined that they went around with each other and made love together. I don't know just how to take it. How would you feel if you met a good-looking, intelligent, negro girl and she became fond of you?"

He winced and his face tightened up. It was just as he had feared—she had mistaken him for a white man. Of course, he *was* white for the most part . . .



just a fraction of negro blood, but he was proud of it just the same, damn proud of it, and if people wanted to repulse him because of this fraction, they could go straight to the devil for all he cared. . . . Should he tell her now and have it over with? He hesitated. Despite his impatient pride he could not bring the words to his lips, as he had done many times before in such cases. White women often made this mistake, and he was inured to correcting it and bearing their constraint, or their shifting to a careful cordiality, but this time his self-possession had vanished. Sometimes he *had* failed to tell women, when he had only wanted a night or two of physical enjoyment with them, for then it never mattered, but . . . some miracle had happened. This girl really seemed to have cut beneath his skin, and . . . yes, he was afraid of losing the chance to see her again.

He didn't love her now—in the deep, seething way that was the real thing—but he felt that if he continued to meet her he probably would, and this was a rare sensation to him. She would have to be told some time, of course, but . . . not to-night. He simply couldn't run the risk of spoiling this growing harmony between them, of not seeing whether it might flower out into an actual ecstasy. He couldn't.

Blanche began to wonder at his lengthy silence, and she looked inquiringly at him.

"Please excuse me," he said at last. "I was sort of . . . sort of waltzing in a dream with you for a while. . . . Negroes and whites are human beings after all, and the fact that a man's colored shouldn't make



him an inferior animal. But that's an old story to me. I've got it all memorized. Race-prejudice, and fun-damen-tal repugnance, and all the disasters that spring from intermingling. Oh, yes, these things exist in most people, of course they do, but I refuse to believe that exceptional men and women can't rise above them. If they can't, then what *is* exceptional about them?"

Something in the weary contempt of his words should have suggested to her that he was pleading his own cause, but her delighted immersion in him made her oblivious, and she mistook his words for those of a rarely unprejudiced white man. How eloquently and clearly he talked! He had an unassuming but fervent way that was far more attractive than Helgin's suave, superior jovialities, or Oppendorf's tired belligerency, or any of the other postures which she had noticed in different men at the party. Was she really beginning to fall in love with this Eric Starling? Somehow, she felt that no matter what faults she might discover in him afterwards, they would not be huge enough to destroy this present sense of communion with him. You had to trust to your instinct in such matters, and this instinct certainly hadn't failed her up to date. Hadn't she always doubted and feared Campbell, and held him at arm's length, in spite of his smooth protests and promises? But gee, what if she *were* deceiving herself? This time it would be a real blow.

"I think I agree with you. . . . I'm not sure," she answered at last. "I guess no person can tell how



he's going to feel about, well, loving somebody who's of another race, unless he actually runs up against it himself. I certainly believe negroes and whites ought to talk together, though, and try to understand each other more. There's too much darn hate and meanness in this little world, as it is."

"Yes, entirely too much," he said, in an abstractedly weary way.

Helgin walked up and Blanche introduced him to Starling.

"Found your ideal yet, little gal?" he asked, grinning. "A studio-party's an excellent place for such delusions."

"'F I had, I wouldn't tell you, old boy," she answered impertinently. "You'd just answer 'Nice li'l baby, all blind and deaf and everything.'"

"Ideals are out of fashion, Mr. Helgin," Starling said. "They don't seem to blend so well with synthetic gin, and the Charleston, and divorces at six for a dollar."

Helgin countered with one of his bland ironies and then said: "The party's beginning to break up, now. Are you ready to leave, Miss Palmer?"

"Would you mind if I saw Miss Palmer home?" Starling asked, bluntly, but in a soft voice. "I hope you won't be irritated at my nerve."

Helgin laughed.

"Of course not, if it's agreeable to her," he replied. "I never have any desire to interfere with blossoming romances."



"You won't think I'm being terribly rude, will you?" Blanche asked.

"Go o-on, stop the nervous apologies, child," he said. "I'm really glad that you've found a kindred soul."

He shook hands with the other two and walked away.

As Blanche and Starling went for their wraps, they ran into Oppendorf and Margaret, and Blanche introduced the two men, who vaguely remembered that they had met somewhere before. Oppendorf looked even sleepier and more distant than usual, while Margaret was in a giggling daze of contentment.

"He didn't kiss more than two other girls to-night," she said gayly. "I really think he must be beginning to care for me."

"I didn't count more than two in your case, but then we had our backs turned once in a while," Oppendorf replied.

Blanche promised to visit Margaret's studio at the end of the week, with another manuscript for Oppendorf's appraisal, and the two couples separated.

During the taxicab ride to her home, Starling held her hand, but made no effort to embrace her, and although she wanted him to, she felt rather glad at his reserve. How tired she had become of men who desperately tried to rush her at the end of the first night. It almost seemed as though rarely desirable men were never instantly frantic about it—as though their unabashed quietness alone proved their rarity. Naturally, only starved or oversexed men were so imme-



diately anxious for physical intimacies, although . . . Starling might have kissed her at least.

As Blanche stood in the dirty, poorly lit hallway, she smiled for a moment as she remembered how often she had been in this same spot, permitting men to kiss and hug her, out of pity or as a small payment for the "good time" that they had shown her. And now she was parting with a man infinitely more cajoling than they had been, and merely clasping hands with him. Life was certainly "cuckoo" all right. She had arranged to see Starling at the end of the week and leave a night of rest in between. As she retired to her bed, the satiated remnants of the ecstasy-herald were shifting slowly, slowly in her breast. The dream had finally peered around the corner . . . how nice, how sweet, how terrifying. . . .

On the following day, as she worked at the Beauty Parlor, she was in a sulkily grimacing mood. Oh, this endless ha-air-curling, and face-massaging . . . beautifying women and girls so that some male fool would spend his money on them, or offer to marry them, or try to caress them. Gold-diggers, and loose women too passionate to be very efficient gold-diggers, and lazy, decent housewives, and sly-faced wives with a man or two on the side, and kiss-me-'n'-fade-away flappers—take away their bodies and what would be left of them? Less than a grease-spot. Drat this empty, tiresome work. She'd have to get out of it pretty soon or go loony. She wanted to write, and describe people, and live in a decent place, and . . . see Eric Starling.



He moved about in her mind; his fingers were still touching her hands. What a strong body and well-shaped face he had. Funny about men's faces . . . they were usually either too weakly perfect—movie-hero-like—or too homely, but Starling's was in between. And he had a curious quality—not humble but sort of sadly and smilingly erect. What was it, anyway?

During the next two days she treated her family with a greater degree of merry friendliness, and they began faintly to hope that she was coming around to their ways of thinking. In reality, they had ceased to matter much to her, all except her mother, for whom she still felt a weak and troubled compassion. Poor, hard-working, patient, stupid ma. But what on earth could be done to help her?

Propped up against the pillows on her bed, Blanche had written an account of the Vanderin party. With more confident emotions now, fortified by Oppendorf's praise, and with a little, dizzy ache in her head, her fingers had passed less laboriously over the paper. Her sketch was pointedly humorous and disrespectful, and stuck its tongue out at the different men and women who had attended the party. They might be celebrities and all that, but most of them hadn't acted and talked much different from the business men and chorines whom she had met at other affairs. She enjoyed the task of good-naturedly attacking them—it was like revenging her own undeserved obscurity.

Her sketch was full of lines such as: "She was fat, and when she did the Charleston with a little skinny



fellow, why he looked just like a frightened kid," and "The negroes and whites, all except the loving couples, they acted like they were trying too hard to be happy together," and "The party was a good excuse for necking, but they all could have done it much better alone," and "They introduced him as a poet, but when he started to talk to you, why then you got more uncertain about it, and when he was through talking you were just sure that something must be wrong."

When she met Starling, on Saturday night, she was in a facetious and tiptoeing mood. Hot doggie, life was perking up again. As they rode in a taxicab down to Margaret's studio, she showed him the sketch, and he laughed loudly over it.

"You know, the trouble between colored and white people at parties is that they're both acting up to each other," he said. "The whites are doing their darnedest to be tolerant and, well, cordial, and the colored people are always a little uncomfortable. They act self-conscious, you know, or too wild, and why? They're all trying to put their best foot forward, and show that they belong there."

"But how about all the loving pairs I saw at Vanderin's?" she asked. "They sure didn't seem to mind it much."

He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. Of course, she didn't know that in eight cases out of ten—perhaps more—these pairs had nothing but a passing lust for each other. And what if they did?—that part of it was all right. There was no earthly reason why they shouldn't want each other's bodies, unless they



were too cruel or sneering about it. God, sex could be a wild, clean, naked, beautiful thing, and people were always hurling mud and denunciations at it, or slinking with it behind closed doors, damn them. But he didn't want just a flitting affair with Blanche . . . he was sure of that now. He had been afraid that the encouragement of night, and the highballs, and the party, might have caused him to throw a false radiance around this girl—he had done the same thing before, though never so severely. But now he realized that his feelings for her were made of more solid stuff—realized it just after he had finished reading her sketch. He liked her upstanding, inquiring, impertinent spirit, and the unaffected smiles and *moués* that appeared on her face, and the sturdy and yet soft freshness of her body.

Hell was probably facing him. He was a negro, yes, and proud of it, but suppose it caused him to lose this woman? He would almost hate it, then—this streak of black blood which he had always flaunted so defiantly. He wasn't like other men of his kind—cringing about it, and claiming to be entirely white, and fawning before every white woman they met. Stupid lily-snatchers! Not he! Yet he was sorely tempted to flee to this lie, in Blanche's case. If he confessed, then all of his hopes and longings might be shot to pieces. He could picture her in his mind, recoiling from him against her will, summoning pleasant and compassionate smiles, trying to soothe the wound caused by her sorrowful determination never to see him again.



Puzzled by his frowning silence, she said: "What's the matter, Eric?"

"Oh, I was just brooding over some of the injustice in this world," he replied. "It's absurd, of course—never does any good. What were we talking about?"

"You said something about negroes and whites always acting up to each other," Blanche answered, "and then I said that some of the couples I saw at Vanderin's seemed to be really gone on each other."

"Of course they are—for a night, or a month. A year's the world's record as far's I know. It's nothing but surface sex-appeal, you know, and it's not much different from the old plantation-owners down South, who used to pick out colored mistresses. The only difference nowadays is that white women are starting to respond to colored men."

"Gee, I wonder 'f I could care for you, 'f you were colored . . . I wonder now," Blanche said, reflectively. "Of course, I'll never have to bother about it, but it's interesting just the same. I guess a woman never knows how she'll feel about anything until she's got to make a choice. It's all right to think it over and say 'I could' 'r 'I couldn't,' but that's just because you've got to pretend to know yourself anyway. It kind of keeps up your backbone."

She did not notice the pain that twisted his face. He tried his best to be humorous . . . this dark bugaboo was getting on his nerves.

"Mix black and white together and they make gray," he said. "I never did like that color. Let's be more gaudy to-night."



"You're a terrible liar—you're wearing a gray suit," she replied.

He laughed.

"Well, what's a man to do?" he asked. "You women can put on lavender, and orange, and cerise clothes, but if a man tried it he'd be howled out of town."

"It's all your own fault," she said. "Men just hate to look different from each other, and besides, they're always afraid that somebody's going to think that they're showing some weakness or other. I know them."

As they continued the conversation, in a vein of mock-chiding and sprightly rebuke, she knew that she was rapidly descending into the depths of a love for him. She had also been afraid that the giddiness of night and a party, plus her own thwarted longings, might have induced her to throw a glamor over him, and that her next meeting with him might turn out to be somewhat disillusioning. But no, his mixture of frowns and deft gayeties, and his clear, incisive way of talking, were causing her emotions to increase in leaps and bounds. Whenever his shoulder grazed hers, a shamefaced tremor was born within her.

After they had reached Margaret's studio they became more spontaneously mirthful. Margaret was in a frothy mood and Oppendorf seemed to be more affable and relaxed than usual. He read Blanche's sketch with a broad grin on his face.

"That's the stuff, rip it into them, old girl," he said. "When they're not strapping their pedestals to their backs and setting them up in this place and that,



they're wildly reaching for each other's flesh. The very thought of an unassuming naturalness, or a frank and good-natured exchange of challenges, would give them heart failure!"

"Don't worry—they'll live," Starling replied.

Oppendorf was aware of the fact that Starling was a negro, and Starling liked the blunt and impersonal way in which the other man treated him. Congenial, and tossing epigrammatic jests about, the party wended its way to Tony's Club and danced there until 3 A.M. The cabaret was a wild, gargoyleish, shamelessly tawdry place, trimmed with colored strings of confetti, and orange and black boxes over the electric lights hanging from its low, basement-ceiling, and atrocious wall-panels of half nude women in Grecian draperies, and booths against the walls, each booth bearing the name of a different state. A brightly painted railing hemmed in the rectangular dance-floor, and the jazz-orchestra—one of the best in town—moaned and screeched and thudded, in the manner of some super-roué, chortling as he rolled his huge dice to see who his next mistress would be.

Margaret, who also knew that Starling was a negro, glanced curiously at Blanche now and then, and wondered whether Blanche also knew and whether she had found that it raised no barrier. The subject, however, was too delicate to be broached to Blanche on this night. . . . It would have to wait.

Since she was with a man whom she practically loved, Blanche's usual wariness toward alcohol—a caution produced by her desire not to become an uncon-



scious prey—left her entirely, and in spite of Starling's remonstrances, she drank with a reckless glee. When 3 A.M., the closing time, arrived, she was giggling fondly at him, and trying to balance glasses on her nose, and snuggling her head against his shoulder.

When the party reached the street she was barely able to walk, and had to lean against Starling for support.

"Why don't you two come down to our place?" Margaret asked. "The poor kid's going to pass out soon, and then you'll be in a devil of a fix unless she's safely inside somewhere."

"No, I'll call a cab and take her home," he said. "Thank you just the same. She comes from a stupid family, you know, and they'd probably raise a vicious row if she came back to-morrow afternoon."

After bidding the other two farewell, Starling hailed a cab and gave Blanche's address to the driver. She passed out completely in the cab, with her arm around his shoulder and her head on his breast, and as he thought it over he began to regret his decision. He would be forced to carry her to the door of her apartment and wake up her family, and since they were obtuse proletarians, they might imagine that he had plied her with liquor to achieve her seduction. In that case there would be a sweet rumpus, all right! He was not afraid of a possible fight—swinging fists was nothing new to him—but if one did occur, her folks would probably order her never to see him again, or would look him up and discover his negro blood. Again, the ever-blundering "cops" might also interfere in the



matter. . . . In this world it was often imperative to avoid the sordid misinterpretations of other people, for otherwise you would simply be expending your energy to no purpose. No, the best thing would be to take Blanche to his apartment and let her sleep, it off, for then she could return home with the usual story of having "stayed over" at some girl-friend's home. Fearful lies, lies, lies—sometimes he thought that the entire world was just a swamp of them. Well, hell, you'd get very far, wouldn't you, trying to hold out against it!

He tapped on the pane and told the driver to switch to a Harlem address. After he had paid the driver and was half carrying Blanche over the sidewalk, the man called after him: "That's the way to get 'em, Bo!" Starling turned and was about to leap at the leering chauffeur, but burdened with Blanche, whom he could scarcely deposit on the walk, and fearing to arouse the neighbors in his building, he ignored the remark.

His apartment consisted of two rooms and a kitchenette, and after he had placed Blanche on a couch in one of the rooms, he closed the door and changed to his slippers and a dressing-gown. Then he sat down in an armchair and grinned, in a sneer at himself, as he lit a cigarette. This was exactly like one of the impossible climaxes in a cheap movie-reel. The handsome hero had the proudly beautiful girl at his mercy, but nobly and honorably refused to compromise her. Oh, rats, why not walk in and take the only crude, gone-to-morrow happiness that life seemed to offer. Otherwise, she would find out about his negro blood,



before their achievement of finality, and depart from him or tell him to be "just a dear friend," and what would he have then?—not even the remembrance of a compensating night. Hell, he ought to regard her as just another blood-stirring girl, and ravish her, and forget her afterwards. If you failed to trick and abuse women, they usually sought to turn the cards on you—he'd found that out often enough.

He arose and paced up and down the room. No, he was a mawkish fool, a sentimental jackass—he couldn't do it. The dirty nigger couldn't leap on the superior white girl, damn it. He loved this girl—no doubt about that. She had a clear, honest, stumbling-on mind, and her heart was free from pretenses and hidden schemes, and a unique essence, tenderly simple and defiant by turns, seemed to saturate her. It wasn't just her body and face—he had known prettier girls by far—but it was something that clung to this body and face and transformed them to an inexplicable but indubitable preciousness. 'She was unconscious now, and her inert surrender would mean nothing to him except a cheap and empty triumph. He wanted her to come to him joyously, spontaneously, madly, and with quiverings and shinnings on her face!

He sat down again in the armchair. Damn his luck, why couldn't he have fallen in love with another negro girl? He wasn't like some of the men of his race—always chasing after white girls because it gave these men a thrill to boast of having captured them, and soothed their miserable inferiority complex. He had nearly always stuck to the girls of his own race, and



yes, he had loved two of them . . . in a way . . . but it hadn't been the surging, frightened, and at times abashed thing that he was feeling now. He was in for it now, oh, how he was in for it! He would undoubtedly be rejected, and pitied, and reduced to every kind of helpless writhing. It was in him to curse the very day on which he had entered the earth. . . . Good God, why couldn't he shake off this morbid hopelessness? How did he know what would happen, after all? Perhaps her love for him was as overwhelming as his. Perhaps she would be forced to cling to him, in spite of every enormous warning and obstacle.

He passed into a fitful and often dream-groaning sleep. When he awoke it was noon. His room seemed uglier than usual—the straight, oak furniture, and the worn, brown carpet, and the rose-stamped wallpaper were like slaps against his spirit. Money, money—the devil sure had been in an ingenious mood when he invented it. . . . And Blanche Palmer was in the next room—all of him tingled incredibly at the thought of her proximity, and his heavy head grew a bit lighter. Then the door opened and she walked out, slowly, with a sulky, half sleepy, questioning look on her face, and rumpled hair, and a wrinkled gown.

"Eric, what 'm I doing here—what happened last night?" she asked.

"Sit down, dear, and let your head clear a bit—I'll tell you," he answered.

She dropped into the armchair and he drew another chair beside her.

"You passed out in the cab after we left Tony's,



and I decided to bring you here," he said. "It would have been rather ticklish, carrying you in my arms and waking up your, u-um, intellectual family. Their response might have been just a trifle excited, you know. You're not angry with me, are you, Blanche?"

She looked steadily at him, with her head too confused and aching for any definite emotion—for the moment—and then, very slowly, she gave him a tenderly rebuking smile. Somehow, she knew that he had left her in peace while she had slept at his place, and funny, this time she would not have minded an opposite gesture. Things never seemed to intrude upon you unless you were seeking to avoid them! Yet, she was touched by this proof that he had not been hiding a mere, ordinary lust for her. Sweet, sweet boy . . . how her head swayed and throbbed, and yet, despite the pain, a happiness tried to lessen it.

"You really shouldn't have brought me here," she said at last. "My folks'll raise the dickens with me now. Their system is wink your eye at daughter 'f she gets back any time before 6 A.M., and call her a bad woman 'f she doesn't. Still, you'd have been in for it 'f you *had* brought me back, I guess. There wasn't much choice in the matter."

"Why don't you leave that dirty den of yours?" he asked. "You can't go on sacrificing yourself forever."

"Oh, I'm going to leave pretty soon," she answered. "I'd have done it long ago, only I didn't see much difference between living home and staying in some spotty hall-bedroom, and I've never had money enough for more than that. Maybe I can get a fairly decent



place in the Village, though. Margaret tells me that rents are much cheaper down there."

"Yes, you'd better look around," he said, dully.

He couldn't ask her to live with him, or to marry him—especially the latter—without telling the secret to her, and once more his courage failed him. While she was bathing and making her toilette, he fixed a simple breakfast in the kitchenette. Afterwards, as they were lolling over the coffee, he said: "You're looking beautiful this morning. Your face is like . . . well, like a wild rose and a breeze flirting with each other."

"I'm only too willing to believe you, Eric," she answered, softly. "Don't make me conceited now."

An irresistible impulse came to him. He arose, walked around the table, and bent down to her. She curved her arms about his shoulders, and they traded a lengthy kiss.

"I'm in love with you, Blanche," he said, looking away, after he had straightened up.

She grasped one of his hands and answered: "Why, you're startling me, Eric—I'd never have guessed it. Would it surprise, you, too, 'f I said I loved you?"

"Say it and find out."

"Well, I do."

He bent down and kissed her again. Then he clenched one of his fists and walked away. It would have to be told now . . . or never.

"Let's sit on the couch, Blanche, I want to talk to you," he said.

After she had acquiesced they were silent for a full



minute, while she looked at him and wondered at his nervous remoteness. Then he turned to her.

"I suppose you don't know that I'm a negro," he said.

She stared at him with an unbelieving frown on her face.

"A . . . what?" she asked.

"A man of negro blood. My grandfather was white and he married a negress, and my mother married another white man. That's the story."

As she stared at him she felt too stunned for any single emotion.

"Eric, you're fooling me, aren't you?" she asked at last, slowly.

"No, it's the truth."

"But . . . but, Eric, you look exactly like a white man! It can't be true."

"It is, just the same," he answered, oddly relieved, now that he had blurted the thing out, and stoically waiting for her words to strike him. "I have just a small fraction of negro blood, as you see, and most people, like you, mistake me for a white man. God, how I wish I were coal-black—it would have saved me from the heartache that's coming to me now!"

She looked away from him for a while, with a veritable *mêlée* of fear, brave indifference to the revelation, and self-doubt contending within her. Eric Starling was a negro, and she had fallen in love with him, and . . . would she be averse to touching him, now? Would it make any difference? She reached for his hand and held it tightly for a moment, almost in an



absurd effort to discover the answer to the question. Oh, what were words, anyway? He could tell her that he was negro until he became blue in the face, but he didn't give her the feeling of one. Somehow, he just didn't have the physical essence which she had always felt in the presence of other negroes, even those at the Vanderin party. He just didn't have it. There was a fresh, lovely sturdiness attached to his body, and she wanted to be in his arms, and she couldn't help herself. She loved him with every last blood-drop in her heart.

But the future, with all its ghastly dangers and troubles. If she married him, or if they lived together, her father and brothers would try to kill him, or injure him—she knew what *they* would do well enough, the stupid roughnecks—and her mother would weep and shriek, and perhaps try to kill herself, and other people would shun them, or make trouble for them. Even the dirty newspapers might take it up—hadn't she read last week about a negro who had been hounded out of a New Jersey town because he loved a white girl and they wanted to marry each other? People were always like wolves, waiting to leap upon you if you dared to disregard any of their cherished "Thou Shalt Nots" . . . just like wolves. The whole world seemed to be in a conspiracy to prevent people from becoming natural beings and doing as they pleased, even when their acts couldn't possibly injure anybody. It was terrible.

And she herself, would she have courage enough to defy everything for his sake, and would her love



for him continue in spite of all the threats and intrusions? She turned to look at him again. He was slumping down on the couch, with his hands resting limply on his outstretched legs; and his head lowered. All of her heart bounded toward him, and she flung herself against him and cried: "I don't care what you are, Eric! I love you and I'm going to stick to you. I love you, Eric, dear one."

With hosannas in his heart, he placed his arms around her, and they passed into an incoherence of weeping, and kissing, and whispered endearments, and sighs, and strainings. A full hour passed in this way before they could slowly return to some semblance of composure. Then, gradually, they tried to discuss the predicament facing them.

"You're sure that you love me now, dear, but you've got to be doubly sure," he said. "We won't see each other for the next two weeks, and we'll have a chance to think things over then. It'll be hard, hard, but we've simply got to do it. Our minds will work better when we're alone."

"Perhaps you're right, Eric," she said, slowly, "but it wouldn't change me any 'f I didn't see you for a year, 'r a lifetime. Don't be afraid of that."

"You think so now, and, God, I hope it's true, but you must realize what we're going to be up against," he answered. "Your family will raise hell, of course, and other people will turn their backs on us, and you'll have to mingle with negro friends of mine and live among them. . . . Are you sure you'll be able to face all these things?"



She hid her head on the couch for a while, and then raised it.

"I'll be honest with you, Eric," she said. "I'll love you for the rest of my life, and I'll never have anything to do with any other man, but I don't know whether I'm brave enough to marry you and . . . and take all the blows you've been talking about. I just don't know."

"If I were less selfish I'd give you up for your own good," he answered, moodily.

"How about myself?" she asked. "Don't you know I'm afraid that my father and my brothers will try to hurt you, 'r even kill you? Why, I can see the anger and the meanness on their faces right now, and it won't do any good to talk to them! 'F I were less selfish, I'd want to give *you* up, just to save you, Eric."

He kissed her again, and they murmured promises and were loath to withdraw from each other. Finally, she rose from the couch and tried to bring a brave smile to her face.

"I've simply got to be going now, Eric," she said. "I'll come up here the Saturday after next, two weeks from now, dear, 'r I'll write you 'f I just must see you sooner. . . . I know I *will* marry you, Eric, in spite of everything—I know I *will*—but it'll be better for both of us 'f we take our time about it."

"Yes, that's true," he answered, as he fondled her cheek. "I'll spend most of the two weeks writing poems to you, when I'm not in harness down at Tony's. It'll be some consolation, anyway."



She donned her hat, and they exchanged several "last" hugs before they descended to the street, where he called a cab for her and, in spite of her protestations, slipped a bill into the driver's hands. When she reached her home, the family were seated in the kitchen, smoking, reading the Sunday papers, and occasionally debating on the subject of her whereabouts.

"Well, give 'n account of y'rself, come on," her father said, gruffly, as she removed her hat and desperately tried to straighten out the wrinkles in her dress. "'F you was out with Campbell again, I'll make him talk turkey this time. He can't fool around with one of my girls and not expect to do the right thing by her."

His little eyes were tense with irritation and suspicion as he watched her.

"Yeh, you've got a nerve, all right," Mabel piped up. "I never come trotting in at three in the afternoon! You're just losing all respect for yourself, that's what."

"Say, listen, I'm not a child, any more," Blanche answered, wearily resuming the old, useless blah-blah-ing. "I went to a party down in the Village and stayed overnight at my girl friend's studio, Margaret Wheeler, but I don't see why I have to make any excuses about it. If the rest of you don't like the way I act, I'll pack up my things and leave, that's all."

"You will, huh?" her father asked. "Well, maybe we'll tell you ourselves to clear outa here. 'F you can't show any respect for your folks, then it's high time somethin' was done about it!"



"Yeh, that goes for me, too," Harry said.

He suspected that his sister had rejoined Campbell, and he determined to look Joe up and frighten him into marrying her. The damn fool—she didn't have sense enough to look out for herself, and if she kept it up, she'd wind up by becoming little better than the easy skirts he knocked around with. He wouldn't let that happen to *his* sister—not he.

Kate Palmer stuck to her invariable rôle of peace-maker, though she felt sick at heart at her daughter's silliness and looseness. She was staying out overnight with men and getting to be a regular bad woman. It was really terrible.

"Of course, we won't let you leave home," she said, "but you're actin' sim-ply awful nowadays. You'll be disgracin' all of us the next thing we know, gettin' into some trouble 'r somethin'. Won't you promise your ma not to stay out all night? Won't you, Blanie?"

"You know I don't want to hurt you, ma," Blanche replied, as she stroked her mother's hair, "but just the same, I've got to lead my own life from now on. I'm a grown-up person, ma, and not a slave."

"You know we're just askin' you to act decint-like, you know it," her mother said, sadly. "We're none of us tryin' to hold you down."

"Yeh, that's right, you're getting too bold," Mabel cut in, with disguised envy.

*She* scarcely ever "went the limit" with men, and why should her sister be privileged to be more brazen about it.

During all of these tirades, Blanche had wondered



at her own indifference—the battle was on again, but now it had only a comical aspect. These pent-up, dense, jealous people—could they really be related to her own flesh and blood? They seemed to be so remote and impossible. None of them, except her mother, stirred her in the least, and even there it was only a mild compassion. Yet, once she had loved them in a fashion, and felt some degree of a warm nearness that even wrangling had never quite been able to remove. What marvels happened to you, once your mind began to expand. That was it—their minds were still and hard, and little more than the talking slaves of their emotions—while hers was restless and separate, and had slowly overcome the blindness of her former emotions toward them.

And now . . . ah, if they had only known what they really had to rave about. How they would have pounced upon her! The sick fear returned to her as she reclined upon the bed in her room. Perhaps it might be wiser to pack up and leave home immediately. Yet, that would only be a breathing spell. If she married Starling, or lived with him, they would inevitably investigate and discover his negro blood, and the storm would burst, anyway. She tossed about in a brooding indecision.

During the next week she surprised her family by remaining in her room each night. What had come over her?—she must be sick, or in some secret difficulty. When a girl moped around and didn't care to enjoy herself at night, something must be wrong, especially a girl like Blanche, who had always been



"on the go" for the past four years. They suspected that Campbell or some other man might have given her an unwelcome burden, and they questioned her in this respect, but her laughing denials nonplussed them. Harry had an interview with Campbell, and had grudgingly become convinced that Blanche was no longer going out with him. The Palmer family finally became convinced that she had really taken their objections to heart and had decided to become a good girl.

Blanche wrote feverishly in her room, every night, with a little grammar which she had purchased to aid her—descriptions of places which she knew, such as cafeterias, dance halls and amusement parks. Her anger at human beings, and her sense of humor, fought against each other in these accounts, and the result was frequently a curious mixture of indignations and grimaces. Starling was ever a vision, standing in her room and urging on her hands . . . she was writing for his sake as well as her own. If the rest of her life was to be interwoven in his, she would have to make herself worthy of him, and try to equal his own creations, and give him much more than mere physical contacts and adoring words. Otherwise, he might become quickly tired of her!

Her courage grew stronger with each succeeding night, and a youthful, though still sober, elasticity within her began to make plans that slew her prostrate broodings. Eric and she would simply run off to some remote spot—Canada, Mexico, Paris, anywhere—and then the specters and hatreds in their imme-



diate scene would be powerless to injure or interfere with them. What was the use of remaining and fighting, when all of the odds were against them, and when the other side was so stubbornly unscrupulous, so utterly devoid of sympathy and understanding? In such a case, they would only be throwing themselves open to every kind of attack and intrusion, if not to an almost certain defeat. Eric might be a "nigger," yes, but he certainly didn't look like one, and he was better than any of the white men she had ever met . . . dear, sweet boy . . . and she loved him with every particle of her heart. She was sure of that now. She had never before felt anything remotely equal to the huge, restless emptiness which her separation from him had brought her—a sort of can't-stand-it-not-to-see-him feeling that rose within her, even when she was in the midst of writing, and kept her pencil idly poised over the paper for minutes, while in her fancy she teased his hair, or chided some witticism of his. She'd go through ten thousand hells rather than give him up!

After a week and a half had passed, she determined to visit Margaret and "talk it over" with the other girl. It wasn't that Margaret could convince her one way or the other—she had made her decision—but still, she craved the possible sympathy and encouragement of at least one other person besides Eric. It was hard to stand so utterly alone.

After telephoning, and finding that Margaret would be alone that night, she hurried down to see her.

The two girls sparred pleasantly and nervously with each other for a while as though they were both dread-



ing the impending subject—which Margaret had sensed—and futilely trying to delay its appearance. Finally, Blanche blurted out, after a silence: “I suppose you know I’m in love with Eric Starling, Mart. You must have guessed it, the way I fooled around with him at Tony’s.”

“Yes, I’ve been worrying quite a bit about that,” Margaret answered. “Do you know that he’s, well—”

“Yes, I know that he’s a negro,” Blanche interrupted. “It’s true, Eric has just a little negro blood in him, but you must admit, dear, that he’s the whitest-looking one you ever saw.”

“Of course, he’d have fooled me, too, when I first met him, if Max hadn’t told me about it,” Margaret said. “I like him, too. He’s certainly not fatiguing to look at, and he has a lovely sense of humor, but still, can you quite forget about his negro blood when . . . oh, when you’re petting together, I mean.”

“Can I forget it?—why, I go mad, stark mad, ’f he just puts his hand over mine,” Blanche cried. “I’ve never fallen so hard for any man in all my life—I mean it, Mart. I arranged not to meet him for two weeks—just to see ’f I wouldn’t cool down about him, you know—but it’s only convinced me all the more. I’ll never be able to get along without him . . . never.”

“Well, after all, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t have a little affair with him, if you’re careful about it,” Margaret replied.

“But it’s much deeper than that,” Blanche said slowly. “We’re both perm’nently in love with each other, we really are. It’s a big, precious thing, and



not just . . . well . . . not just wanting to have a few parties, you know. I'm going to live with him for years and years, and maybe marry him right now. It's the first time I've ever loved any one."

"But, Blanche, you're going to let yourself in for an endless nightmare, if that's the case," Margaret replied, sorrowfully. "Your people will simply raise the roof off, if they're anything like you say they are. And then, all the other things—children, and living among his negro friends, and getting snubbed right and left. . . . Are you really sure you love him enough for all that? Are you, really?"

"Yes, I *am* sure," Blanche said, in a slow, sick-at-heart, stubborn voice. "I've thought of everything, don't worry about that, and it hasn't given me much rest, either. Oh, how I hate this blind, mean world of ours!"

"Yes, I know, but hating it never solves anything," Margaret answered, dully.

"Well, I'm going to solve it by running off with him," Blanche continued. "We'll go far away, to Paris or London—some place where nobody'll know that Eric's a negro, and we'll stay there for the rest of our lives, that's all. I don't care 'f we both have to wash dishes for a living, I don't. It's all right to fight back when you've got a chance, but not when everything's against you."

"Funny, I never thought of that," Margaret said, more cheerfully. "It might work out that way. Of course, it *is* cowardly in a way, but after all, there's little sense to being brave in the lions' den and getting



devoured. It might work out fine, if you're both certain your love's going to last. Somehow or other, it's hard for me to believe in a permanent love. I don't think I've ever noticed it in any of the people around me. Are you sure you're not just in a sentimental dream, Blanche?"

Blanche reflected for a while.

"Well, 'f we're both making a mistake, we'll be happy, anyway, till we find it out," she said at last. "Good Lord, 'f you never take any risks in life, why then you'll be sad all the time, and you won't have any happiness at all, no matter how short it is!"

"Yes, I agree with you there," Margaret answered, with a sigh.

They fell into a discussion of the practical details of Blanche's possible departure, and the money that would be required, and the difficulty of earning a living in Europe, both trying to lose themselves in a bright animation. When Blanche parted with Margaret, a little after midnight, she felt more confident, and almost light-hearted. After all, if two human beings were wise, and brave, and forever alert, they simply couldn't be separated from each other, no matter what the dangers were.

The mood remained with her and grew more intense each day, and when she rang Starling's bell at the end of the week, she was almost fluttering with hope and resolution. For the first hour they did little more than remain in each other's arms, in a daze and maze of kisses, sighs, and simple, reiterated love words. To Starling, huge violins and cornets were ravishing the



air of the room, and the street sounds outside, floating in through an open window, were only the applause of an unseen audience. After all, only times like this gave human beings any possible excuse for existing—the rest of life was simply a series of strugglings, and dodgings, and tantalizings, and defeats. The least pressure of her fingertips provoked a fiery somersault within him, and the grazing of her bosom and face against his aroused revolving conflagrations within his breast. Blanche had become a stunned child, scarcely daring to believe in the compensations which were ruffling her blood to something more than music, and yet desperately guarding them, incoherently whispering over them, endlessly testing them with her fingers and lips, lest they prove to be the cruellest of fantasies.

When Blanche and Starling had made a moderate return to a rational condition, they began to discuss their future.

“Don’t you see that we must run away, Eric, dear?” she asked. “We’ll just be crushed and beaten down, otherwise. My brother Harry, he’d never rest till he’d put you in a hospital—oh, but don’t I know him—and he might even try to do worse. I get the shivers when I think of it.”

Her words were an affront to his courage, and he said: “Listen, I can take care of myself—I’ve been through a pretty tough mill.”

“Of course you can, but they wouldn’t fight fair,” she answered, impatiently. “They’d just proceed to get you by hook or crook. And that’s not half of it. Why, I can just see ev’rybody turning their backs on



us, 'r making nasty remarks, 'r trying to poison us against each other. We've just got to run away and live where nobody knows us!"

"No, it would be too yellow," he replied, stubbornly. "All the things you mention will only be a test of our love for each other. If we can't stand the gaff, then our love isn't what we thought it was."

"I'm not afraid of that," she said. "I'd go through anything with you 'f I thought it was the best thing we could do, but why should we stay here and run up against all kinds of suff'rings and insults, and dangers, too, just to show how darn brave we are? It's not cowardly to run off when everything's against us—it's not."

"Well, let's think it over for another week, anyway," he answered, slowly. "I don't like to slink away, with my tail between my legs, but maybe it's the only thing to do. If we were only starting a little affair, like most of the mixed couples that hang out at Vanderin's shack, then it would be different, of course, but we're probably facing a whole lifetime together, and it's a much more serious matter. The trouble is I've a great deal of pride in me, honey, and it always wants to fight back."

"I have, too," she said, "but in a time like this it's just foolish to be so proud—it'll only help other people to make us unhappy, that's all."

They were silent for a while, and then he said, with a smile: "Good Lord, we're getting morbid and theatrical. The whole thing may not be half as bad as



we think it is. Anyway, let's forget it for one night, at least."

They spent the remainder of the evening in an idyllic way. He read her his sensuous, symbolic poems, and talked about them, and told her exciting stories of his past life, while she tried to describe some of the struggles and hesitations which had attended the birth of her mind, and her search for happiness in the face of sordid punches, and stupid jeers, and all the disappointments with which ignorance slays itself. They resolved not to become complete lovers until they were really living together and removed from fears and uncertainties. When they parted at 2 A. M. they were both wrapped up in a warmly exhausted but plotting trance. They arranged to meet on the following Wednesday, at Tony's Club, and Blanche felt feathery and on tiptoes, as she rode back to the uninviting home which she would soon leave forever.

The next four days were excruciating centuries to her, and she was barely able to stagger through the nagging, drab details of her work at Madame Jaurette's. She spent her nights writing in her room, and the even trend of her days remained uninvaded until Tuesday evening, when she found a letter waiting for her at home. It was from Oppendorf, who told her that he had polished up her account of the Vanderin party and had sold it to a New York magazine of the jaunty, trying-hard-to-be-sophisticated kind. She was overjoyed as she stared at the fifty-dollar check which he had enclosed, and she could scarcely wait to tell the news to Eric. Now she had proved her mettle, and



was on the road to becoming a creative equal of his—blissful thought.

When she met him at Tony's, she gayly extracted the check from her purse and waved it in front of his face.

"Now what do you think of your stupid, hair-curling Blanche?" she asked elatedly.

He laughed at her excitement as he led her to a table.

"You haven't made me believe in your ability just because you've been accepted by a frothy, snippy magazine," he said. "I knew all about it the first night I met you."

"Never mind, this means I'm going to make a name for myself," she answered, proudly.

He gave her a fatherly smile—what a delicious combination of naïvetés and instinctive wisdoms she was.

"I felt the same way when I first broke into print," he said. "The excitement dies down after a while, and then you don't care so much whether people like your stuff or not. You get down to a grimly plodding gait, old dear, and you start to write only for yourself. Then each acceptance means only so many dollars and cents."

She retorted merrily: "Wet ra-ag—don't try to dampen my spirits. It can't be done."

The brazenly sensual clatter and uproar of Tony's pounded against their minds, and even Starling, more skeptically inured to it, and knowing every hidden, sordid wrinkle in the place, became more flighty and swaggering as he danced with Blanche. It meant some-



thing, now that the girl whom he really loved was stepping out beside him, and it had become something less gross than a collection of rounders, sulky or giggling white and colored flappers, fast women, and hoodwinked sugar-papas spending their rolls to impress the women beside them. Now it was an appropriate carnival-accompaniment to his happiness.

Immersed in Starling, Blanche did not notice the group of newcomers who had seated themselves two tables behind her. They consisted of her brother Harry, another wooden-faced, overdressed man of middle age, and their thickly painted, sullen-eyed ladies of the evening. Harry was settling the details of a whisky-transaction with Jack Compton, the other man.

"We'll have the cases there by midnight on the dot," he said, in a low voice. "I've got a cop fixed up, an' he's gonna stand guard for us an' say it's K.O., 'f any one tries to butt in. We'll have to hand him a century, though."

"That's all right with me," Compton replied. "You put this deal through without slipping up and there'll be a coupla hundred in it for you."

"It's as good as done," Harry answered, with a heavy nod.

Then, glancing around, he spied Blanche at the other table.

"Say, there's my crazy sis, Blanche," he said, pointing to her. "In the red pleated skirt, two tables down by the railing. See her, Jack?"

"Yeh . . . she's a good looker, Harry," Compton replied.



"Say, I know the fellow with her," one of the woman broke in. "He works here—he's public'ty-man for the joint. Name's Starling—Eric Starling. I met him down here about a week ago. What's your sister doing out with a nigger, Harry? She seems to be mighty thick with him from the way she's cutting up."

"Go o-on, he looks damn white to me," Harry answered, intently scowling toward the other table.

"Well, he is a nigger just the same," the second woman said. "It's known all around here—he don't deny it any. I've seen them like him before. They're only about one-eighth black, I guess."

"Can't your sister get any white fellows to go around with?" Compton asked. "She must be hard up, trotting around with a shine."

"Yeh, she's sure crazy about dark meat, I'll say," the first woman commented, with a laugh.

The taunts pierced Harry's thick skin, and a rage grew within him. He'd stood for her going with Jews, and wops, and dopey weak-sisters, but a nigger was too much! It affronted his family-pride and erectness, and made him feel that his friends had been given a chance to ridicule him in an indirect way. For all he knew, Blanche might be having intimate relations with this coon, or might be even fixing to marry him. The thought was like a red-hot iron. His own sister, acting like a slut, in a black-and-tan dive, and consorting with a nigger there, or maybe with more of them. . . . By God, he wouldn't stand for that!

"I'm gonna go over an' bust him in the nose," he



said, half rising from his chair. "He'll be leavin' white girls alone after I'm through with him!"

Compton pulled Harry back to his chair.

"Keep your shirt on, d'you hear me," he said. "If you start a scrap here you won't have a chance—every bouncer 'n' waiter in the place'll be right on top of you. I've seen them in action before, and believe me, they work just like a machine."

"Well, I can get in a coupla good cracks at him before they throw me out," Harry persisted. "I want to show that dirty shine where *he* gets off at, makin' a play for a sister uh mine!"

"You won't show him this way," Compton retorted. "You'll land in the hospital, and you'll land there quick, too. This gang down here don't like a white man's looks anyway, and they'll give you the leather, just for good luck. Come on, let's all clear outa here. You can lay for him to-morrow night, if you want to, 'r else give your sister a good bawling out when you get her home, an' make her stay away from him."

"Well, they can't do nothin' 'f I go over an' bawl her out now," Harry said, with a drunken stubbornness.

"Aw, keep your head, Harry, we don't want to get the girl-friends here into no trouble," Compton replied. "Come on, let's beat it, Harry."

The women added their persuasions, and Harry finally gave a reluctant assent. He departed with his friends, after vowing to settle the matter during the next few days.

Blanche and Starling continued their entranced ca-



pers until the closing hour, and when they rode to her home, they were steeped in a tired and lazy fondness, with their arms around each other and their heads close together. The apparitions and doubts had disappeared from their situation, as far as they were concerned, and nothing remained but a deliciously overheated and rumpled nearness to each other. They arranged to meet on the following Saturday night, and exchanged several farewell kisses, in the cab, before they reluctantly parted.

Blanche slept until noon, since the day was a holiday—Memorial Day—and when she awoke, the other Palmers were eating a late breakfast around the kitchen table. As she entered the kitchen, in her kimono, the family turned and surveyed her, each bearing a frown on his face. Taken aback, and suddenly prodded by an instinctive fear, Blanche advanced slowly toward the table. How could they know anything about Starling—nonsense. They were probably “sore” at her for some other reasons.

After she had seated herself at the table, the bombardment commenced.

“Who was you with last night?” Harry asked, with a sneer, to see whether she would lie.

“It’s none of *your* business,” Blanche replied, coolly, her fears soothed now.

“We-ell, that’s a hot one—going around with a nigger is none of our business, huh?” Mabel queried, in a shrill voice.

“What do you mean?” Blanche asked, mechanically



—the blow had come, just when she had least expected it!

She became sick at heart, and dreaded the impending assault, and scarcely knew what she could answer. If she became defiant, it would only enrage them all the more, and it would be useless, besides . . . what could she do, oh, what? To attempt to explain matters to her family would be ridiculous.

"You know what we mean all right," her father cried. "You've been goin' out with a shine—Harry saw you together last night down at Tony's Club. For all we know you may be hooked up with him in the bargain. 'F I was sure of it, by God, I swear I'd take a swing at you, daughter 'r no daughter!"

Blanche remained silent—what they said to her didn't matter, and she wasn't afraid of them, but Eric, Eric . . . they might kill him, or cripple him for life. They were really aroused now as they had never been before—she knew them well enough to tell when they were merely blustering and when not—and they felt that she was on the verge of disgracing and insulting everything that supported their lives—the cruelly proud, angry delusion of blood superiority, which they clung to as a last resort against all of the submissions and lacks in their existences. In their opinion, Eric was little better than a rat, who had tried to break into the sacred family kitchen.

Her mother began to speak, through fits of weeping.

"Oh, Blanie, Blanie, what's come over you? You must be outa your head, you must. You've just got to give up that nigger you're goin' with, 'r you'll be break-



in' my heart. . . . Blanie, Blanie, promise your ma you'll never give yourself to nobody but a white man . . . promise me, Blanie."

"See what you're doing to ma," Mabel said. "You're just bringing her to her grave, that's what!"

"Well, I'm gonna take a hand in this," her father cried. "You'll stay away from that fellow from now on, 'r I'll land in jail f'r manslaughter. I'm not kiddin' any this time. You've been havin' your own way, an' stickin' up your nose at us, an' we've let you get away with it, but you never put over anythin' like this—hookin' up with a lousy nigger! What have you got to say f'r yourself, huh?"

"Yeh, that's what I wanta know," Harry said, as he glowered at her.

The promptings of cunning began to stir in Blanche's brain. To save Eric, she would have to lie, abasing, tricky lies. No other answers were possible. If she strove to argue with her family now, or if she showed a hairbreadth of independence, they would instantly seek Eric out, and even his life might be in danger. She was certain of that.

"I've only gone out with him twice," she said. "I didn't know he was a negro, I swear I didn't. I only found it out last night, just before I left him. He told me he was then, and I was good and mad about it. I called him down for daring to make up to me, and I told him I'd never, never see him again. He looks just like a white man, and he'd fool almost anybody. I swear he would."

"Bla-anie, I mighta known it was somethin' like



this," her mother cried, joyously. "'Course you won't see him no more, now you've found out, 'course you won't."

"I should say not," Blanche answered, vigorously. "I'm not picking out negroes this year, unless I don't know what they are."

Blanche hated herself for the groveling words which she forced from her mouth, and yet she felt that she had given the only shrewd answer that could possibly placate the stupid viciousness assailing her. She'd be willing to become a carpet, for Eric's sake, any day in the year, no matter what nausea might be attached to the proceeding.

"Well, all right then, we'll let it rest," her father said, in a growling voice; "but just the same, Harry an' me'll keep a close watch on you. 'F you're not tellin' us a straight story, it'll be bad for this Starling guy. We'll put him in a nice, tight hotel, all right."

"I'm with you there," Harry broke in. "What I'd like to know is why she didn't speak up when we started to ask her about it."

"Gee, you were all on top of me like a ton of bricks," Blanche answered. "I didn't have a chance to say anything. Besides, I was ashamed of the whole thing."

"Sure, I can understand that," Philip said, eagerly, glad that his favorite sister had not been intending to disgrace them after all. "Didn't Harry say this morning that it was hard to tell this Starlun guy from a white fellow? Blanche was just taken in, that's all."

"'Course she was," Mrs. Palmer affirmed.



"Well, I'm not sayin' she wasn't," her father replied. "We'll just keep tabs on her, anyway, an' make sure of it."

Blanche continued her meek explanations and protests of innocence, and her family gradually calmed down and resumed a surface quietness. She knew that the suspicions of her father and Harry were still smoldering, and that these two would probably shadow her for some time, or use some other means to become cognizant of her nightly destinations and companions. She noticed also the speculative looks that Mabel gave her now and then. Mabel was too expert a liar not to doubt her sister's tale, and she determined to do a little "snooping around" herself. You never can tell about Blanche.

The remainder of the day and night held a nightmare to Blanche. She had to affect a nonchalant mien—they would doubt her again if she showed any sadness or depression—and the strain was infinite, like holding up a boulder. Visions of Eric's lifeless body dodged in and out of her mind and made her shiver helplessly. Harry and his gangsters could "get" poor Eric without half trying, and it would be useless to attempt to flee with him now, since she would be under the severest of scrutinies, where any false move might bring misfortune. Still, wasn't there another way out of it? Why couldn't they remain scrupulously apart from each other for half a year, or even longer, and then, when all of the suspicions and spyings had completely vanished, suddenly run away together? By that time



her family would certainly have forgotten the matter, and in the interim, she could go about with other men—somehow compelling herself—and outwardly maintain her normal ways. A wan approach to cheerfulness possessed her, and late that night, she sat up in bed and wrote to Eric:

MY DEAREST BOY:

My brother Harry saw us at Tony's last night, and this morning they gave me hell. It was no use to argue with them and make them even nastier—just no use. They said they would kill you, dearest, and I know they were not fourflushing when they said it. They're cruel and stupid, and to their way of thinking, I'd disgrace and humiliate them if I ever married you. It's what they cling to when everything else shows them how small they are—this snarling, keep-off pride in being white. . . . I lied to them and said I hadn't known that you were colored, and swore I'd never see you again. Please, please forgive me, Eric. They'd have killed you if I hadn't lied. And please, Eric, you must do as I say. This is the plan I have. We won't see each other for exactly six months, and then we'll suddenly run away together. Everything will be quiet then, and before they know what's happened, we'll be hundreds of miles away. If we tried it now we wouldn't have a chance. Please, dearest boy, write and tell me you'll do as I say. I love you more than anything else in life, and you're like a prince walking through some rose-bushes, and you fill all of my heart, and I'll never give you up—never be afraid of that. Answer me



at once and address the letter to Madame Jaurette's. I'm sending you a thousand kisses, dearest boy.

BLANCHE.

After finishing the letter, she felt woebegonely relieved and slightly hopeful, and the mood stayed with her through the following day of work at the Beauty Shop. She had placed a special-delivery stamp on the letter, and he received it in a few hours. After he had read and reread it several times, with a touch of anger lurking in his numbness, he began to pace up and down in his room, as though striving to goad himself into life again. Was she really giving him up, and trying to hide the blow with promises of a future escape? Was she? . . . No, Blanche was too inhumanly honest for that—even if she had wanted to lie, she could never have induced herself to put the words on paper. If he were wrong in this belief, then he would lose all of his faith in his ability to peer into human beings, and would call himself a fool for the remainder of his life! Somehow, a tremor of simple sincerity seemed to run through her letter—he couldn't be mistaken.

Well, what then? If he persisted in running off with Blanche now, it might lead to melodrama. White gangsters such as her brother would not hesitate about attempting to "croak him off." He wasn't afraid of actually fighting them, but any man was always defenseless against a sudden bullet or knife-thrust, and he certainly didn't care to die that way. B-r-r, the thought brought a fine sweat to his temples. No, these



whites were little better than rodents, when their angry pride was aroused, and you had to use some of their own tactics, or perish.

They regarded him as a dirty nigger, these lily-pure, intelligent, lofty, noble-hearted people. What a nauseating joke! But, joke or no joke, it had to be grappled with. Blanche was right after all—when you were in a trap you had to gnaw slyly at the things binding you. It was galling to your erect defiance to admit it, but often, in a dire crisis, an imbecilic bravery brought you no gain, and caused your extinction. Yes, Blanche was right—it would be best for them to separate for half a year and then take the other side by surprise, with a thumb-twiddling swiftness. They would have to be patient—splendidly, grimly, bitterly patient—and somehow control the aches and cries in their hearts.

Of course, during the coming months, he would go out with women now and then, or chat with them—as a feeble diversion—but he would shun any intimate relations with them, if it were humanly possible. A pretty, well-shaped girl could always affect a man, in a purely physical way—he wasn't trying naively to delude himself on *that* score—but just the same he intended to try his damndest to remain faithful to Blanche. She invaded and stirred him as no other woman had, and if he consorted with other girls now, it would be a taunting and unanswerable aspersion against the depth and uniqueness of his love for her. In such a case he would be forced to admit that all of love was only an easily incited lust—but it wasn't true. He *would* remain faithful to her.



He sat down and wrote a hopeful, agreeing letter, expressing his implicit belief in her, and swearing that he would remain true, and urging her to emulate his jaunty fortitude.

When she received the letter on the following afternoon, a surge of youthful determination almost drove the darkness out of her heart. If he had written morbidly, or in despair, her tottering and beleaguered feelings would have been crushed, but now she felt armored and half-way restored to her former happiness. After all, they were both very young, and six months now were little more than six hours in *their* lives.

During the next month she went to cabarets and theaters with other men, and wearily repulsed their inevitable attempts to embrace her afterwards, and preserved a careful attitude toward her family—not too friendly and not too ill-tempered. They would have suspected her of playing a part if she had suddenly seemed to become too pliable and harmonious. She saw Margaret and Oppendorf once, but did not tell them anything concerning the developments in her relations with Eric. She feared that they would advise her never to see him again, and she didn't care to pass through the futile torments of an argument. She had made up her mind, and no human being could change it.

When a month had passed, however, a restlessly jealous mood stole imperceptibly over her. Perhaps Eric was running about with other girls now; perhaps his head was pressed against the smooth tenderness of their bosoms, or perhaps he had found another girl,



far more beautiful and intelligent than any Blanche Palmer. The mood reached a climax one Sunday afternoon, as she boarded an "L" train and rode down to the Battery. Yes, of course, he must have forgotten her by now. He met tens of women every night down at Tony's, and among all of them it would be easy for him to find a quick-minded, tempting girl—perhaps one of his own race, who would not lead him into staggering troubles and difficulties.

She sat on a bench facing the greenish-gray swells of dirty water, and watched the bobbing boats, and the laboriously swaying barges, and the straining, smoky tugs. A mood of plaintive, barely wounded peace settled about her, in spite of the jealous ranklings underneath. For an hour she sat draped in this acceptant revery, with her mind scarcely stirring. Then, glancing up, she saw that Eric was standing beside her.

For almost half a minute they stared at each other, without shifting their positions.

"Eric . . . darling . . . what are you doing here?" she asked at last.

"I never dreamt I'd see you," he answered. "I was walking along and trying to forget my blues when I caught sight of you. I tried hard to turn around then and avoid you, but I just couldn't do it. I couldn't."

"I'm so glad you didn't," she said, as he sat down beside her. "Eric, my boysie, what's been happening to you?"

"Oh, I've been plodding along, and writing poems to you, and extolling the barbaric charms of Tony's," he replied. "I'd get worried and hopeless every now and



then, thinking you were in some other man's arms . . . just like a boy who doesn't know whether he's going to be whipped or petted."

"That's exactly how I felt," she cried. "Why, say, I had you falling in love with every snippy, doll-faced girl in New York!"

They laughed—softly, ruefully, and with a relaxing weariness.

"How about your exquisite people?" he asked, after a pause. "Do they still keep a close watch on you?"

"No, I think they're completely deceived by now," she said. "I've played a foxy game, you know—going out with other men, and bragging about them, and hiding my feelings all the time. I was so afraid that somebody you know would see me with some fellow and tell you about it. I just couldn't help it, darling. One little break might have given me away, and I just had to fool my folks. There wasn't any other way."

"Sure, I understand," he replied, as he stroked her hand and looked at her with the expression of a man relievedly twitting his past fears and pains.

They were silent for a while, reveling in the unexpected, warm nearness to each other and feeling a giddy swirl of revived faiths and hopes. Their first little rush of reassuring words had aroused all of the deferred plans and buried braveries within them, but the awakening was not yet articulate enough for spoken syllables. They longed to embrace each other with an open intensity, and the effort needed to control this desire also served to prevent them from talking. Then



Blanche remembered a fear which she had experienced during the previous week.

"Eric, did you ever see a play called 'God's People Got Wings?' " she asked.

"No, but I've heard about it."

"Well, it certainly made me shiver," she said. "One of Oppendorf's friends took me down to see it, and I've never had such a dreadful time in my life. It was all about a colored man marrying a white girl. It ended up with the colored boy killing his wife and then committing suicide—think of it!—and I was just gripping the sides of my seat all the time."

"Were you afraid it might have some connection with us?" he asked, gravely.

"No, no, of course not," she answered, as she clutched his hand. "D'you think I'm silly enough to let some prejudiced man tell me whether I'm going to be happy or not? No, Eric, it wasn't that, but I did feel angry and upset, and, we-ell . . . it set me to wondering. Why do all these writers now always insist that colored and white people weren't meant to get along with each other—oh, why do they?"

"Mister Shakespeare revived it with his Othello and it's been going strong ever since," he replied, with a contention of forlorn and contemptuous inflections in his voice. "It can't be argued about. Most of them are perfectly sincere, and they really believe that people of different races always hate and fear each other at the bottom. You could get yourself blue in the face telling them exceptional men and women aren't included



in this rule, but it wouldn't make the slightest impression."

"But why are they so stubborn about it?" she asked.

"That's easy," he answered, wearily. "They don't want to admit that there's the smallest possibility of the races ever coming together. It's a deep, blind pride, and they simply can't get rid of it. They're hardly ever conscious of it, Blanche, but it's there just the same. Why, even Vanderin isn't free from it. Take that latest book of his—Black Paradise—and what do you find? What? He's just a bystander trying to be indulgent and sympathetic. It's the old story. Negroes are primitive and sa-avage at the bottom, and white people aren't . . . white people like your brother, I suppose."

He had been unable to restrain the sarcasm of his last words because his wounds had cried out for a childish relief. She had listened to him with a fascination that was near to worship . . . what a dear, wise, eloquent boy he was! When he talked, even the ghosts of her former specters fled from her heart. Let the world call him a nigger—what did it matter? They didn't care whether he was beautiful or not—all they wanted was to "keep him in his place," these in-tel-ligent people, just because he happened to have a mixture of blood within him.

"Oh, let's not talk any more about it," she said. "We're in love with each other, Eric, boysie, and . . . 'f other people don' like it they can stand on their heads, for all I care!"



He fondled her shoulder, gratefully, and an uproar was in his heart.

"Blanche, what's the use of waiting and waiting?" he asked at last. "We're only suffering and denying ourselves when there's no reason for it. Let's run off to-morrow and marry each other. If we wait too long we'll feel too helpless about it—it'll grow to be a habit with us. I can't exist any longer without you, Blanche—it's just impossible . . . impossible. I'll draw out the thousand I have in the bank and we'll hop a train for Chicago to-morrow afternoon. Don't you see it's useless to keep postponing it, Blanche?"

His eagerness, and her longing for him, expelled the last vestige of her fears.

"Yes, dear, I'll go with you to-morrow," she said.

Their hands gripped each other with the power of iron bands, and they stared hopefully out across the greenish-gray swells of water.

THE END



















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